Their Captive Prize - ('The Hunted' Chronicles - Book 1)

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Their Captive Prize - ('The Hunted' Chronicles - Book 1)

by WeaverOfWords (Fantasy_elf)

Summary

It was supposed to be a program run by the government. A testing of survival skills in a high danger level 1 quarantined zone, with a reward at the end for each willing participant. Only they had lied and not everything is as it seems.

Charlotte:
I hadn't signed up for this. In fact, I'm not even supposed to be here. After being badly injured when I was twelve years old, my life has been nothing but a struggle. The doctors told me back then that I would never walk normally again. Yay for me. So how the hell was I supposed to survive in this nightmare I'd found myself in?

The Hunters:
The thrill of the hunt had never tasted so sweeter to them. Their clan was one of the strongest and most skilled, feared by many, even by those of their own kind. Each one of thpitiful prey would meet their ends swiftly and without mercy. For nothing could ever beat the dangerous frenzy of a freshly made kill… Nothing, except for the claiming of the little fertile female amongst their group.

She would be theirs, it was a pledge. A vow. A promise.

18+ Includes strong language, violence and scenes of a sexual nature. M/M/M/F Reverse Harem. Read with caution!

Notes

Note: So I noticed that a lot of folks enjoyed my Predator 'Claimed' fic, so I've decided to post a longer story based around the Predator franchise. This one will include a disabled/physically challenged heroine and will eventually lead to a reverse harem situation with 3 lead male Yautja hunters. It will include scenes of blood, violence and sexual content (Maybe some dub-con). If this is not your cup of tea then you probably shouldn't read it. Consider yourselves warned. Read at your own risk.

Disclaimer: I don't own anything of the Predator characters, worlds, events or storylines.

And so it begins...

Chapter Notes

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As soon as I open my eyes I instinctively know something is wrong, that I am no longer at home. I blink open my heavy eyelids, blinded by the brightness of the world around me. Everything whirls and my stomach lurches. I'm laid back against something soft and firm like leather. My hands reach up and brush against smooth cold glass. In a whoosh, it sweeps aside, allowing a thick cloying heat to assault me from the other side. Loud voices yell from all around me, echoing and indistinguishable.

A blur of motion rushes in front of me. A figure running. Another one soon follows, and then another. Sprinting towards the mass of trees further ahead.

Wait. What?... Trees?

I blink again, confused. I swallow thickly, willing my limbs to move. I tumble out of the strange container holding me and I land to my knees onto lush mossy earth. Trees and bushes surround me from all angles; a vast wilderness that reminds me of the jungles seen on some of the documentary channels. The leaves glow an array of startling shades of colours, including deep purples and bright pinks. I look towards the sky, seeing not one but two luminous moons against a gold-red sky.

It dawns on me that I am no longer in the city or even anywhere remotely familiar. I stare about in awe and dread. Perplexed beyond words.

Where in the hell am I?

Another figure sprints past behind me. My brain, lost in a fog, barely registers their presence. They shout something to me but my ears are ringing so loudly that I cannot hear them.

I try to stand and wince as my twisted leg cries out in painful disagreement. I glance around, searching for my walking stick. It's nowhere to be seen. Wobbling slightly, I struggle up onto my feet. Sweat trails down my nape as I attempt to inhale a deep breath. The air is so terribly humid, nearly choking me.

A loud blast sounds and shakes the ground. I stiffen and whirl towards the direction it had come from. I notice a collection of pill-shaped containers, similar to the one I had just come

from, dotted around the spacious clearing. One of them opens and a familiar broad figure emerges from within.

I frown, peering closer in disbelief. "Jason?" I call out, shuffling forward a step. Uncertain.

The man's face lifts towards me and I see his familiar dark eyes. His tanned skin is blackened with oil, dust and god only knows what. His brown hair is a mess around his ears. Relief surges when I see that he is unharmed.

"Charlotte?" His low and somewhat groggy voice reaches me. "Is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me." I start to stumble towards him, as fast as my useless legs would allow me. Without the support of my cane, I was as unsteady as a newborn giraffe. Pain shoots up my thigh.

"Oh, thank god you're OK." Jason lunges at me wrapping me his arms in a fierce hug. His heat is a comfort against the chaos of the world around us. "Where are we?"

All at once, everything begins to fly back to me in a whirl of memories. Through the fog, I can recall certain things. One moment we, Jason and I, had been at a Christmas party, enjoying ourselves amongst friends. The next I was being dragged down a hallway. By Jason himself, in fact…

"*Lottie, come on. We've got to get out of here," Jason rushes, pulling me along with him by my upper arm. I stumble after him, leaning heavily on my stick as I take in his troubled expression. My heart races with alarm.*

"*Jason? What's going? Where are we going?" I gush, trying to keep up with him.*

He keeps turning to look behind him, as though expecting the devil himself to appear out of nowhere to claim his soul.

"*I'll explain later," he says as we head out the front entrance and then towards our car in the driveway. He opens the door and practically shoves me inside. "Get in, quickly."*

I yank on my seatbelt with shaking hands. "Jason, you're scaring me. What the fuck is happening?"

I can only make out certain phrases as he mumbles to himself in panic. He launches into the seat next to me and revs the vehicle into life.

We don't make it out of the drive, though. A figure dressed in black steps up behind our car, blocking the way. I can see the strangers shape in the small mirror beside my head. I can also see the gun he's aiming towards the rear window. More figures emerge, stepping from the shadows to surround us. The rising mist combined with the brightness of the headlights prevents me from making out their appearances.

A shot sounds and glass shatters. A scream erupts from my throat as I duck down, and then all chaos erupts. Someone rips open the door, reaching for Jason who attempts to fight them off. Mine opens next and I struggle in earnest against the hands grabbing for me. It is only

when something hits me hard against the back of my head that I slump forward and collapse into the waiting darkness...

And now here we were. Where exactly that was, I had no idea, but it certainly wasn't England any more.

I look down at myself, noticing that I'm still wearing the same knee-length black party dress and tights. My shoes, however, are gone and my red hair is loose about my shoulders in a tangled mess. I feel no injuries on my person, only the burning ache in my bad leg as I put my weight against it.

"This is crazy," Jason murmurs, as lost and in shock as I am.

"Hey, lovebirds!" Someone shouts to us and we both turn to find a middle-aged guy dressed in a camouflaged uniform eyeing us warily from the edge of the forest. "What the fuck are you doing? Don't just stand around playing petty fingers. You need to hide!"

Another low boom sounds, rattling the very ground beneath our feet. A streak of fiery bright light sears past out frames, slamming into one of the trees. It explodes under the impact, sending shards of branches and splinters raining through the air. Instinct surges and I lift my arms in a protective gesture against the blast.

Holy shit… This isn't happening. This can't be happening right now.

"Come on, we've got to go," Jason urges, grabbing at my elbow.

Adrenaline throbs through my veins and with little else to do I follow his lead. We tail after the stranger who had now disappeared into the bushes up ahead. Heat licks at my skin like an invisible fire. We dive into the wilderness, branches snapping at my cheeks and bare arms. I can see someone up ahead running.

We try to keep up but every single step is pure agony. I cursed then at every aspect of my life. Ever since I was twelve I had lost my ability to walk normally, to run like others could. Who would have known that a simple trip down the stairs could have done so much permanent damage? My body no longer belonged to me any more. Each movement felt cumbersome and painful. Every muscle and bone screams in protest, needing rest.

At one point I stumble, nearly falling to the ground. Jason yanks me up and draws me closer to his side.

A howl sounds, low and plaintive, similar to that of a wolfs. Only different. More menacing.

Through the moist locks of my hair, I peek back at what is following us. I instantly regret doing so, as I behold a monstrous creature, unlike anything I have seen before in my life. It gains on us with terrible speed, bounding on four legs. Its shape is like that of a dog, only not. It appears to be a mixture of things; a cross between a lizard and a porcupine, bearing dangerous quills around its head. Leathery skin covers its hide and shark-like teeth glint as it snarls, chasing merely a short distance behind us.

"Oh shit."

Jason stiffens against me, pulling me down as the creature lunges.

A gunshot splits through the madness. I scream as its huge body soars through the air, only to then fall in a slump right at our trembling feet.

We both spin, terrified beyond words to find a short-haired blonde woman standing behind us. She looks like some kind of warrior goddess, with a slender yet muscular body to match it. Her black attire clings to her like a second skin, making her appear deadly. Her glacial eyes match the grimness in her expression. The large shotgun in her hand lowers just a little.

She speaks and her voice heavily tinted with an accent. Russian, perhaps. "If you value your lives then I suggest you do not scream like that again. You'll draw them to us."

"Agreed." The man from earlier, the one in the camouflage clothing, stalks forward from the shadows, his gun held aloft as he peers around the surrounding trees warily. His cool gaze falls to us again. "Keep down and don't make so much noise. They can hear everything, even your racing heartbeats."

I'm beyond perplexed. Shivering against Jason, I simply nod.

More people begin to emerge from around us. I slowly take them all in, counting them all to see there is at least twenty of us in total. Most of them are male, with strong looking characteristics and all around the same age range. The Russian and I are the only females.

Everything stills and an eerie silence settles amongst the forest. Someone breathes a sigh of relief and I can feel the tension draining from the atmosphere.

My eyes fall to the guy in the camouflage again. Everyone seems to be waiting for him to speak, as though he is the leader of this small gathering. His strong back is facing us as he glares out towards the shadows beyond the trees. Expectant and on edge.

I swallow, finally finding my voice. "Who are you?" I whisper to him, needing some answers.

A long moment passes, and then he slowly turns around. His grey-blue eyes fly to Jason, eyeing him closely, before sliding down towards me. "My name is Jasper Croydon. And you?"

"Jason Wells," Jason says, his voice tight with fear. "And this is my girlfriend, Charlotte."

The stranger, Croydon, lifts a brow at that. "You know one another?"

Jason stiffens. I nod in answer.

"So, you both came here together?" Croydon asks again in disbelief.

I nod again."Yeah, that's right."

All eyes fall to us and my skin prickles. They all seem kinda shocked.

"Please..." I finally say, coughing away the croak in my dry throat. "Where are we?"

"You don't know?" Croydon replies with a tilt of his head. I catch the hint of a white scar across his right cheek. He certainly looks like he's been through a war or two, and then some.

I open my mouth, about to speak, but Jason beats me to it.

"I think I know," he says, sliding his attention to me. His troubled expression nags at me, making worry curl in my belly like a worm.

I blink at him, waiting for him to explain.

He sighs, rubbing at his brow. "This is all my fault..."

"What do you mean?" I tilt my head. What on earth was he talking about? What was his fault?

I turn to him fully, my gaze beseeching. I needed the truth from him now. I needed answers or I was surely going to explode from my skin. This was all too much for me to handle.

"You're in the hunting zone," Croydon cuts in. "*The void,* that's what they call it. It's where *they* come to hunt for blood and sport."

"They?" I ask, still clueless.

I trail my gaze across everyone one by one. Despite the situation, most of them appeared relatively calm, considering we'd all just been chased by a giant lizard-beast. None of them was asking questions either. Which was very disconcerting.

"Yes, *they*," Croydon speaks, placing his hands upon his hips. He sends a dark pointed look to the man beside me. "They are the Yautja, but we call them *Predators*. They're an elite alien species of hunters that prey on other weaker species from other planets."

Alien species? Was he joking? And planets? What the hell.

My lips itch, wanting to smile. In fact, I wanted to outright laugh in his face. "You're joking, right?"

Croydon's hard stare tells me otherwise. "Do I look like I'm joking?" *No, he really, really doesn't.* "You don't know anything, do you?"

I wince at the bite in his tone.

He strides closer to us, sliding the length of his gun back into its holster on his thigh. "Do us all a favour, yeah? Take everything you know about the universe and throw it out of the window, because this isn't earth any more, Princess." He gestures towards the jungle behind him. "Those things out there aren't human. Everything on this planet is going to try and kill you, so pay close to attention to what I'm about to tell you..."

I say nothing, not daring to speak. My mind toils, trying to grasp at what he'd just said. Logic told me that such a thing was impossible.

Croydon continues, not missing a beat. "The Yautja are much more superior than we are. They're bigger, meaner and better than us at everything." He growls then, throwing his head back in exasperation. "Fuck, I don't have all day to explain this to you. You'll understand when you see them."

The blonde Russian slides forward to stand beside him. She leans forward to whisper to him but I can hear her nonetheless.

"She won't stand a chance against them, Jasp. She can't be here."

I see him nod in agreement. Some part of me bristles, annoyed at being talked about even when I'm stood right next to them.

"Yoot-Ja?" I echo, confused. "Can someone please just explain what's going on? Why we are here?"

"Ask your lover-boy," the taller woman says, flashing a dark glare towards Jason.

Jason? I spin towards him. He'd gone quiet for a time, refusing to speak out. Did he know something about all of this? His dark eyes slide to me and I see something lingering there in their depths. Fear and… guilt?

"I screwed up, Lottie." He grabs for my hand, a clear sign that he's about to confess something important to me. "Shit, I don't even know where to start."

I wait and dread pools in my stomach like burning acid.

As kids, we'd been neighbours. We'd practically grown up together, which had then grown into something more as we'd both bloomed into adulthood. He'd become my everything. He was my first in everything. My life. There was nothing we did not share or tell to one another. Or so I had thought... Clearly, he was keeping some secrets from me.

"A few months ago, I signed myself up for this weird scientific research shit with the government," he begins, trembling slightly. "I don't remember much about the details, but I know that it included me going into some kind of survival program in a quarantined zone." He shakes his head, rubbing at his face wearily. "It sounded like a good idea at the time, but I wasn't thinking clearly. They said that if I managed to complete the program then they would reward me with a lot of money..." He pauses a brief moment before adding quietly. "… and I needed some drugs so..."

"Wait. What?" I gape at him disbelief. "I thought you were finished with all that, Jason? You promised me..."

I knew he'd done some form drugs in the past, but he'd always sworn to me that he'd never do them again. Especially not now that we were together. The betrayal of it hits me hard like a

punch. I can feel everyone staring at us and I wanted nothing more than to hide away somewhere.

"I know, Lottie," he says, lowering his head like a child about to get scolded. "And that's not all. When I realised they intended to send me off into space on some sick hunting expedition I tried to back out of the application." His wide shoulders shrug. "I tried to run, but they came after me anyway."

I pull away from him a little, realisation dawning. "Those men at the party..."

Jason nods. "Yeah, they were coming for me. You see, once you sign the contract there is no backing out of it." He reaches for me again, his expression twisted in regret. "I honestly didn't expect them to bring you here as well, Lottie. I'm not even sure why they did, it must have been some sort of mistake… I'm so, so sorry, babe."

My mind is empty, yet raw at the same time. The events of the last twenty-four hours are beginning to hit me hard. I find myself staring down at the dark grass at my feet, blindly transfixed by each tiny blade. I should have been at home right now, doing my laundry and getting ready for work tomorrow. What were we going to do?

"You Ok, Princess?" Croydon asks, his tone deep but gentle.

I shuffle, unsure of how to answer. My leg twinges at the movement. "I dunno. Not really. It's been a long day."

"Agreed," he replies, straightening to face the vast wilderness of the trees again. "And it's not over yet, not by a long shot. Ten participants were expected to arrive and instead, we now have eleven."

I blink slowly at him, incredibly sombre and weary to the bone.

"I understand that you're confused, perhaps even scared. I get it. You didn't sign up for this, but you're here anyway and you need to keep your shit together." He sighs, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Those assholes down in HQ are either pulling a prank or seriously sick in the head. We've not had this happen to us before."

"She will not last a week in this place," the Russian speaks up again. "She is a liability and will get us all killed."

Jason's arm slides around me. "She'll be fine, I'll take care of her."

The older man chuckles wryly at him. "She's an invalid, kid. Do you intend to carry her around on your back the entire way?"

His comment makes tears sting in my eyes. I grit my teeth, angry at how callous they were being. Most of all, I was deflated by the truth of it all. What he had said was true. I was a weakness to them and would surely slow them all down.

"If I have to," Jason bites back, squaring his shoulders. "As I've said, I will look after her."

A smile crosses Croydon's mouth but it doesn't carry any warmth. "Out here it's every man for himself. If you dawdle around trying to play the white knight then you'll get left behind as well. I hope you realise that."

Something inside of me lurches. What exactly was he trying to insinuate? Were they planning to leave me here? To just abandon me to this hell of a nightmare by myself? Oh god, I hoped not. Jason's silence beside me makes a chill roll down my back.

It wasn't far. I didn't want this. Any of this.

"Tomorrow we head north-east towards the river. Hopefully, there will be a supply drop there waiting for us." Croydon gives me a long look. "You either keep up or get left behind, it's that simple."

"And the aliens? The predators? What if they come?" Jason asks.

"If they come then we run like hell." It was stated so simply, so matter of factly. "Let's just hope that they take no notice of your girl and decide to leave her out of the hunt… though I highly doubt it."

Jason squeezes me slightly in comfort.

"Come on, let's get moving," Croydon commands, ushering us all to follow him. "We've got a long way to go and there's still plenty of sunlight hours left. It's best that we keep going."

He casts me one more glance before turning away. I take a deep breath, readying myself for the challenge ahead. Without a word, we trail after them.

Sin'Chila (Predator) POV

-o-o-

Everything was set into motion. *Perfect*.

Staring down at the small gathering of soft meats below, Sin'chila can feel the hot rush of excitement coursing through his warrior blood. The hunt would begin again soon and he was more than ready for it.

He could hear their every breath and each steady heartbeat, a reminder of what was to come. The infrared of his vision finds them all with ease, marking them all one by one. They move below him with slowness as one unit. They tread through the overgrown flora, heavy-footed like giant beasts. Loud and foolish. With their primitive tools, they create fires, giving away their positions far too easily.

Such weaklings.

They thought themselves safe in the darkness, believing their numbers would somehow protect them. How very wrong they were. None of it mattered. For he was one of the most skilled of his clan, an elite warrior. There was no place in which they could hide from him, he

would always find them. His senses were honed and precise, his nature relentless. As were his kins.

These soft meats would regret their carelessness, Sin'Chila vowed it. He could almost feel the warmth of their blood already seeping through his claws as he renders the flesh from their very bones.

A blade glints from beside him. The branches dip and sway, belying the presence of another at his side.

A deep rumbling of clicks echoes to him. "Shall we take them now, *mei'hswei* (Brother)?"

Turning slightly, his vision falls upon the large hulking mass of the hunter beside him. His brother's eagerness is as strong as his, Sin'chila could nearly taste it upon the air.

He lifts a clawed hand, stopping him. *No.*

"All in good time, Yaknaur," he trills back, "be patient."

These humans weren't much of a challenge, but Sin'Chila knew how to make the hunt more interesting. He would feed them hope first, allowing them to develop a sense of security, before slowly stripping it away. Without a doubt, their destructive natures will rise to the occasion and they will eventually turn on one another in desperation. Making them weaker. More vulnerable to attack.

"This is the perfect time to strike!" Yaknaur's hiss breaks through his train of thought.

Through the blackness, he takes in his brother's larger size. Heavy, thick armour covers his hide, adorned with the various trophies of his most treasured kills. Yaknaur was indeed extremely skilled in killing his foe, using his brute strength and tenacity above all else. But he lacked the tactics of a true hunter. He did not truly understand that the thrill came from not killing the prey but from the chase itself. The mounting of anticipation before the knife made the blowing strike.

"We will have our victory, but not tonight," he says again, his tone imperious.

A low snarl is his only response. The sound of metal sliding back into its sheath sings through the night; Yaknaur's submission clear.

Another smaller shadow drops down beside them, settling amongst the branches, silent and agile. The newcomer tilts his helmet in greeting. Its left cheek is adorned with the red symbol of their clan.

"N'jauka toudi mei'hswei, (Welcome, little brother)" Sin'Chila presses a clawed hand to his breast in a display of affection.

Memnis returns the gesture, bowing his visor low in a show of great respect. "*Thar'n-da s' yin'tekai tek mei'hswei,* (Strength and honour to you my brothers)"

Though smaller than those of his kin, Memnis' black armour allows him to blend in with the night and shadows. His stature often deceives the other larger males, tricking them into a false sense of security, only to then move in with the swiftness of a serpent.

"What news do you bring?" Sin'Chila asks, moving to look down once again at the humans below.

Memnis purrs smoothly. "There are more humans to the east, they're heading towards the mountains. A small tribe, it seems. All of them males and strong."

Yaknaur snorts, his derision obvious.

"Excellent."

Sin'Chila continues to track the creatures beneath him, watching their every move as they set up their small encampment. At least there would be others hunt after these were disposed of.

"Watch them closely. It will soon be time to begin."

A gathering of hisses sound, acknowledging his command.

The humans are completely oblivious to them, not at all aware of the hunters hovering directly above their sanctuary. The red hot heat of their bodies blaze like a beacon as they all move and settle down into position, huddling close together like a pack of wild dogs.

When the time came, their ignorance would lead them to their end, Sin'chila was sure of it.

Foolish, mindless creatures...

Chapter 2

Dawn breaks early across the sky, bathing the forest in a gentle golden light. It dances across the leaves overhead, making casting them in iridescent shades. Eerily beautiful and otherworldly. The fire crackles beside me, casting a warmth around our small camp like a blanket. I yawn from my spot beside Jason and force myself to sit up. It would be time to get up soon and my hips were already beginning to ache just at the thought of the long trek to come. My, now ruined, party dress had done little to keep me warm during the night, but luckily for me, the last few nights had been particularly mild. My tights were now decorated with holes, completely useless against my legs.

I run a hand through my tangled locks. The Russian woman, who I had soon come to know as Alicia, passes me a canteen of water and I take a deep, fulfilling swig. I wipe at my mouth, passing it back with a nod of thanks.

Croydon steps forward with a firm look. He'd been awake and alert long before the sun had even peeked across the horizon, clearly on edge and keen to start the day.

"The next drop point should be nearby. We must make a move and reach it before night falls again." He nudges his foot against the man next to him, waking him up. "Let's get going."

Jason stretches, helping me to stand. We share a protein bar between us, passing some of it to the Asian man beside us.

Croydon looks to us. "Listen up. Considering your stuck in this shithole with the rest of us, it's important you know the ins and outs." He lifts a stubby, dirty finger. "Number one, not all rivers are safe to drink from, so don't assume that just because they look clear that they're safe. Number two..."

We pack up the rest of our stuff, following after Croydon as he leads the way through the bushes. His voice drones on, teaching us about the various dangers of the planet we'd recently been dumped on. He explains about the differences in seasons, the swift changes that can happen between being exceptionally humid to lethally cold. I mentally take notes as we continue our journey. The nights, from what I could gather, tended to be the coldest, the daylight hours longer than those on earth.

The creatures, the *Yautja*, he'd mentioned are described somewhat as the jungle boogie-man. An alien species that hunts everything within the vicinity, taking trophies along the way, like some kind of Kal Drogo wannabe from Game of Thrones. I try to imagine what they look like, envisioning some kind of blue, lanky figure with the stereotypical alien egg-shaped head holding a spear. I choke back a snort of laughter.

I glance toward Jason, noticing how pale and afraid he is. His hand grips the knife in his hand as if it is some kind of saving grace. My own hands are empty. They'd refused to give me a weapon of my own, explaining that it had something to do with remaining as non-threatening as possible. That maybe the hunters wouldn't attack me if I was considered unarmed and weak. Which did not reassure me at all, not even the slightest.

Croydon continues to speak, his low voice weaving in and out of focus. “… plants, the yellow flowers, in particular, can be toxic. Also, be careful of the purple ones that look like a foxglove, their pollen can cause some really nasty side effects.” He spears a look towards the man beside him pointedly. “Trust me, I know...” I don't manage to fully hear what he's saying, but I catch the general gist of it. Something about having the most *painful boner he'd had in years.*

So it had some kind of aphrodisiac effect then? I called that a 'no, thanks'. Note to self: Keep away from the Viagra plant.

“Look out for the Noctis Hares too,” Alicia says to everyone, walking at Croydon’s side, as usual. “They come out at night and may look cute like earth rabbits, but they’ll quickly gnaw the flesh from your bones.”

“Most importantly...”

Croydon snaps a hand out and grabs at a short broad dude nearby. He yanks him to a stop, startling the other male. A loud snap sounds and suddenly a huge net flies up from the group inches away from their feet. My heart lurches a beat as I stare at it in surprise. It soars up into the air, dangling within the branches uselessly.

Croydon glowers at his companion. “Always be aware of where you walk. These things are everywhere and the predator will use every trap, lure and trick to try and capture you. So keep alert.”

“The predator is a vicious foe,” it was the Asian man, Li, who speaks this time. I notice the grip on his rifle tightens, as if on edge. “Sometimes they hunt alone, sometimes in groups. Their clans compete for superiority. They are extremely territorial.”

“Oh, they sound great,” Jason mumbles sarcastically. “Note to self, don’t invite them over for Christmas parties.”

I roll my eyes at him, smirking. Distracted, I stumble a step, my bad knee lurching out from under me. Jason catches me before I can plummet to the ground. I lean against his side for a moment and smile at him in thanks.

“You Ok?” He asks.

“I’m fine,” I reply quietly, fighting against the pain. “I’m just a little tired.” I so desperately wished that I had my walking stick with me, it would make things so much easier.

He accepts my answer, albeit reluctantly, before tugging me along to follow the others. Branches and leaves crunch underneath our feet. A few birds chirp from the trees, soaring from branch to branch at our approach. Every sound and flicker of movement is like a harsh slap to the face. This was all *very, very real*. I’m not dreaming.

“Females, though rare amongst their kind, are even more dangerous,” Croydon says, “and twice as big as their males. I doubt you’ll find one of those here, but if you do, run like hell.”

I blink at that in surprise. The females are bigger? Holy cow.

"...red patterns and symbols on the armour represent the Bloodren clan, they're the biggest and meanest of the lot of them..."

"Ugh, for crying out loud," Jason cuts in loudly, slumping his shoulders. "I would literally give my left testicle for a cheeseburger right now."

Li throws him a dark look over his shoulder before turning around again.

Jason, however, doesn't take the hint. "I mean, we've been walking for ages now. When are we planning to stop? Lottie needs to rest."

My eyes widen at him. I mean, sure, I would love to stop for a quick breather, but not whilst the others were still keen to keep moving.

"Hey. Don't use me as your excuse." I whisper, pinching at him playfully.

"We've only been on the move for an hour, Prince Charming," Alicia snaps back at him. "What's wrong? Is your stamina lacking?"

"Can't we just take a minute?" Jason tries again.

"No." Is the reply.

I tighten my hold on his jacket, bringing his attention down to me. "They're right, babe. Now is not the best time. Maybe we should--"

He jerks away from me, leaving me completely unbalanced and standing by myself, unaided. I teeter a minute, agony flaring as all my weight is abruptly pressing down on my weaker leg. I glare at him and he scowls back at me.

"Don't you fucking start too," he growls at me and I'm taken aback by the swift attack of aggression. "I've had enough of people pushing me around."

"What the hell is your problem?" I say, perplexed.

Everyone draws to a stop and slowly turns to face us. Anger and frustration is obvious across everyone's expressions. Sweat gleams upon brows as heavy breathing whispers through the air. We're all tired and needing rest, yet there was only one amongst us who was acting like a child about it.

Alicia moves to stand beside me, her taller frame towering easily by a heads length or two. "This *boy* of yours whines like a wounded dog."

Jason whirls on her. "Fuck you, you stupid bitch!" His arms fly up, slashing through the air in anger as his voice rises to an impossible volume. "I'm fed up of this bullshit. I'm hungry. My feet are killing me. And that mother fucking woodpecker is doing my head in! Can't we shoot it? I swear to god that little fucker is following us."

Alicia's head tilts and then she stiffens. “Woodpecker?”

Croydon holds up a hand, gesturing for quiet. Just like that, everyone freezes. Silence settles around us, so empty and loud that it makes my ears thrum with the intensity of it. The birds are gone now. Not a single living creature can be seen or heard anywhere. My pulse roars in my ears, anxious. All eyes fly to the treetops, scanning everywhere as though expecting to find something.

But what? I look as well, seeing nothing.

And then I hear it… A slow trilling noise that seems to echo loudly from every direction at once. It does, in fact, resemble a woodpecker with its continuous rattle, only something was odd about it. I can feel eyes on me, watching closely. It comes again, this time from our left and we all spin around to face it. The eerie low clicking is now coming from somewhere within the trees.

A thick branch dips directly above us as the leaves rustle and move.

“*They’re here...*” Someone whispers as goosebumps spread across the length of my nape.

I frown as a tiny thread of red light sears its way across the space, hovering against the chest of Croydon’s uniform.

What the...

“Everybody move! Run!”

Like a nest of ants, we split, rushing in all directions. I almost trip over a small log hidden amongst the blanket of leaves across the ground. Heart pounding, I try to follow after the others, sheer terror lending me wings even as my muscles scream out in defiance. The figure in front of me, whoever it is, begins to gain speed almost disappearing completely from sight. I whimper, desperately trying to move faster.

I can hear something crashing through the foliage behind us. Above us. A roar bellows, slamming against my ears painfully. Panic surges and I half-dart-half-stumble to the left, hoping to become lost in the thick shadows of the forest.

I see a gathering of shapes up ahead and rush towards them. My knees are pretty much ready to collapse as I spring out amongst the figures. They all turn to look at me with wide frightened eyes, weapons aimed in my direction. I hold up my hands and then collapse against a trunk, exhausted beyond reason.

“It’s just me,” I pant, eyeing them all warily.

“Where is the boy?” Alicia rasps, doubled over, also attempting to catch her breath.

The boy? I freeze as realisation dawns. I glance around the small group, noticing some of us are missing... Including Jason.

“Oh god, where is he?” I ask, desperate to recognise his face amongst the crowd around me. “We must have somehow gotten separated.”

As if on cue, a loud shout splits through the atmosphere; a screech of fear that sends my spine rigid with dread.

“Lottie!”

I spin towards the noise, instantly recognising his voice.

“Jason?”

Like a pack of wolves, we all move towards the source of the shouting, thrusting our way through the undergrowth. Branches snap at my face, but I’m so overwhelmed with stress that I don’t feel the sting of them.

Croydon launches towards the front, leading the way. Guns raised, three of our guys break from the group, circling around the sides. Clearly, they know something is amiss, that something is ahead of us, but I can’t see a thing.

“Someone, please! Oh fuck, help me!”

As one, we all step from the line of trees and into what looks to be a small encampment of some kind. I hover at the back, keeping out of the way. A blazing fire burns at its centre, covered in heavy logs. My eyes grow wide, bile rising in my throat as I take in the huge darkened patches of black across the forest floor. A huge totem-like pole sits to one side, a mangled carcass half-hangs from it. Whatever it is, it doesn’t look human. A huge hole is gaping at its midriff to allow long lengths of fleshy entrails to spill out from inside like a can of worms.

I cover my mouth. The rancid smell alone is enough to make my insides curl.

Weapons rise, pointing at something. Or rather *someone.*

The world seems to slow as I peer around a shoulder to take in the scene before me. There, struggling for his very life, is Jason. He’s almost completely blocked from sight by the huge, hulking creature towering over him. His face contorts in pain, practically pleading as his captor lifts him by his neck, dangling his feet above the floor with ease. The hand around his throat is monstrous and large, tipped with dangerous blackened claws. The back facing us is even wider, powerfully built with hardened muscles.

The creature turns, ever so slowly, to face us.

Good god, the thing is huge. Humanoid, yet not entirely human. No mere man could be that big. Hell, not even a body-builder on steroids could have achieved that kind of shape. The leathery plains of its skin are a pale grey-green shade, decorated with uneven scaly patches across the shoulders and spine. Pipe-like locks hang down past its wide shoulders. Primitive plates of armour cover its groin and chest, leaving the rest of its physique bared and naked.

Something that I couldn't recognise was resting against its back, but I did notice the scary-looking blades strapped to its heavily muscled thighs.

Was this what Croydon had been warning us about? Was this *a predator*?

I blink, noticing the white strand of beads circling its neck. I blink again, peering closer as horror grips me. Wait, they weren't beads, at all... They were teeth.

Jason's strangled sob breaks through my wanderings and I take an unsteady step forward. The creature rotates its head towards me and the blood turns cold in my veins. Its large head, covered by a blackened metal helmet, tilts.

"Jason," I call softly to him, only to be drawn back by a hard hand upon my elbow.

"Stay back you idiot," Alicia hisses, shoving me behind her. "Do you want to die?"

A rustling comes from somewhere beside us and we lift our heads. Something ripples there, gradually taking shape. Crouched low and covered in shadow was another one. Only this one was slightly smaller in size. Sleeker. Unlike the first, this one was encased in thick layers of armour from head to toe. A strange red symbol, like that of a handprint, marks its helmet…

Shit, what had Croydon said about the red markings? Ugh, why hadn't I listened properly?

I step back, uneasy. Alicia and the others follow my lead, retreating away from the smaller predator, even though it merely sits there watching us in utter silence.

An eerie trill sounds and then another massive shape stalks out from the darkness revealing itself to us. This one is equally as large as the first, with the same mottled skin and steel-like coverings. A long spear is gripped within its fist, the tip stained crimson with...

A gunshot sounds, and then another. One of the beasts roars in fury and then pure chaos erupts.

"Lottie!"

Suddenly Jason is at my side, tugging me along as he turns to flee back into the jungle. Bodies jostle and brush past me in their haste. I have no idea what is going on. The greenery blurs as I race through it, almost falling to my knees when my legs threaten to collapse from beneath me. Adrenaline pushes me onward with each pounding step.

"Keep going, Lottie. Don't stop!" Jason urges. He seems unharmed, but I'm not entirely sure.

"I can't," I gasp painfully. "It's too much. I need to--" My words cut short as my foot slams down, only to then drop as the ground lurches from beneath me.

I scream, sucked down into the very earth itself. I fall, stopping only when my body strikes the ground once again. Gasping, winded, I roll over, only to find myself at the bottom of a huge hole. Holding my side, I whimper in pain, but then drag myself to a stand. The sides of the pit are tall, far too tall for me to climb out of. Yet, I'm still determined to try.

Pulse racing, I drag myself up and begin clawing at the dirt.

“Jason!” I practically scream, trying to get a foothold. Surely there was a way to get out of here. “Jason, help! I’m down here!”

His pale, handsome face appears at the opening, peering down at me. He kneels down, reaching out an arm. “Come on, I’ll pull you up. Hurry!”

I use all my will and strength to try and stretch to him. My fingers end up a short distance away from his, unable to grab him. I climb another step or two up the crumbling wall.

“I can’t reach you!” My voice cracks, hoarse with utter fear.

Alicia appears at his side, looking down at me with darkened icy eyes. Croydon joins them, his expression turning trouble when he notices me at the bottom.

“Leave her, we don’t have time for this. We’ve gotta go.” His words stab into my chest like a hot knife.

“No, please, don’t go!” I shout at them desperately. “I can do it!”

They can’t actually be thinking about leaving me. Surely they wouldn’t. I slide my pleading eyes towards Jason, begging him silently.

“We can’t just leave her here,” Jason says, clearly torn. Hesitant.

“She’s done for, kid. If you try and help her now you’ll both die. Is that what you want?”

Jason turns his head down to me once again. Despair and resignation crosses his face, as obvious as the brightly burning sun in the sky.

My hand flies up, needing him. “Please, Jason. I’m almost there. Lean down to me, I can--”

“I’m sorry, baby.” He doesn’t move towards me at all. In fact, he edges away from the hole almost disappearing out of sight. “I can’t do this... I have to go.”

“No!” My scream is filled with terror, almost choking in my throat.

I can’t see him any more. He’s gone, just like that. I can’t hear a single thing, everything is dangerously quiet. Shock morphs into anger, which then turns into pure devastation.

He was gone. Jason had actually left me, abandoning to my fate. He hadn’t even tried…

Tears bloom in my vision, spilling steadily down my cheeks. I shiver, slumping against the muddy incline. I claw my fingers into the dirt, trembling hard. I’m so overcome with emotion that only the vital need for survival remains.

I can't stay here. If I did, I was going to die.

Yaknaur's POV

Night descends, casting the world in shadow and darkness. But for Yaknaur, it did little to prevent him from seeing his prey. His hot warrior's blood flames with the thrill of the chase. *Finally.* Two of the herd he and his brothers had been hunting had already met their makers by his claws. A great victory for him. He would take pleasure from skinning their corpses of their bones.

On heavy, yet silent feet he approaches the trap he'd set for the *hoomans*, hovering at the edge of the pit beside his brother and leader. Sin'chila's proud frame stands guard, watching the creature captured at the bottom with quiet interest.

"Our kill awaits its demise. Why do you falter?" Yaknaur nudges at him with his shoulder, encouraging him to lift his spear and make the final strike.

A small whimpering sound emerges from the creature below and Yaknaur peers closer at it. His head tilts, his mane swaying as he takes in the tiny figure scrambling around amongst the sodden mud. It reeks of fear and something... *strange.*

"This one is female." He states it obviously, beginning to understand now.

Females were treasured amongst their own kind. Most of them could hold their own, even against a male as large and skilled as himself. They birthed sucklings and demanded only the greatest of respect. But this was not one of his own. It was a weak hooman, nothing more.

He vision zooms in on her, taking in the injured limb on her left side, plus the dangerously low heat of her body temperature. This one was sickly and would surely die anyway. What little did it matter?

"Strange little creature..." Sin'chila trills lowly from beside him, the sound barely audible.

Grunting a laugh, Yaknaur watches the human. The pitiful child-maker continues to scramble against the walls that contain her, attempting to crawl herself free. Over and over again she plummets back down to the bottom with a cry... only to then try again.

"Stubborn," he huffs in derision, yet unable to look away. "And foolish too."

Amusement dawns when she decides to kick out in fury against the air, screaming at the top of her lungs in frustration. She picks up a stone, throwing it out of the pit. It soars past Sin'chila's shoulder, almost grazing it. He neither moves nor shows any sign of concern. Both of them knew that she couldn't see them, not in this endless blackness. She was completely blinded to them. Vulnerable and weak.

"She has fire, at least," Sin'chila comments with a rasping chuckle. "Perhaps not so helpless after all."

“Her screeching will bring every man-eating beast to her side if she carries on,” Yaknaur adds. “She may have fire, but she lacks common sense.”

“Like you, then?” His brother jibes playfully.

Yaknaur growls lightly in response. “If you cannot end her life, then perhaps I will do the honour. I know of a male back home who would eagerly trade with me for her pale, smooth hide.”

He reaches for a blade at his thigh, almost drawing it from its sheath, before pausing. This prey before him would not give him victory, he realises, for a true hunter only ever targeted the strong. And this one was injured and maimed, not worthy enough. There would be no glory for him in this.

In the gloom, the female’s head lifts and for a hearts beat Yaknaur almost imagines that she’s looking right at them, even though it is an impossible task for one such as she.

Deep in thought, he considers her further...

She smells of human blood, her fear strong even through his visor. Without a doubt, she was one of the most smallest soft-meats he’d ever seen in all his long years of joining the hunt. Her body was thin but soft-looking in places, making her appear tiny in comparison to her other male companions. Her lack of strength made her unappealing to him, yet there was something about her that drew his focus. She reminded him of a small newborn pup, helpless and fragile against the elements and danger. Even her own cowardly mate had abandoned her, leaving her to fight off her enemies alone; a great dishonour indeed.

“What shall we do with her?” He leaves the question hanging heavily on the air, sensing his brother's reluctance.

The female crumples in defeat, curling into herself. The length of her fiery mane spills like molten fire across the ground. Soft keening mewls spill forth from her maw, like that of a wounded animal. Shivering, she huddles there, almost pitifully.

“Leave her,” Sin’chila decides after a long pause. “Let the wilderness take her, we shall consider it a small mercy. She will die eventually, it is inevitable. May the stars align and shine in her favour this night.”

Yaknaur, for once, hums in agreement and nods. “Very well. It is as you will it, my brother.”

Casting one last glance at her, the brothers turn away and stalk their way into the darkness. Tomorrow a new dawn would arise and the hunt would begin anew. By then the small female would have perished to elements, they were sure of it.

Chapter 3

When I wake, I am shivering with cold. Dirt covers every inch of me and leaves are snarled into the mess that is my hair. The sun is beginning to peek above the horizon and I sigh in relief. Despite the agony lancing through my body, despite all the terror I had suffered and the aloneness...

I was still alive. I had made it through the night.

The icy ground had offered me no warmth, making it nearly impossible to sleep at all. Through the late hours, I could hear every shuffle and crack amongst the forest, which sent my mind into a reeling panic. The hours had dragged painfully slowly as I waited for morning to come, desperately in need of some light and heat.

Unfurling from my curled position, I wince. My back strains and my hip flares in rebellion, but I force myself into a standing position, eyeing my hollow prison with new eyes. Now I can see the edge of the pit and the deep grooves I had dug in the mud trying to climb my way out.

My mind flies to Jason and the others, remembering how quickly they had left me to my fate. I understood that their need for survival was important. In fact, I understood that instinctive urge to run when your own life was in danger very well. But I would have never done that to Jason. Never him. If the situation had been reversed I would have stayed with him, to whatever end. My throat constricts tightly with betrayal, only to then flare with determination.

I hobble closer, peering at the incline, measuring and analysing each side carefully. Which one was steepest. Which one had better footholds for me to use and climb up. My eyes land upon a thick protruding silvery root embedded amongst the soil.

There. Perhaps, I could use it to pull myself up.

I begin to ascend, my hands clawing in deep as I attempt to carry my entire weight upon my arms. I manage a few steps up before one of my feet slip, sending me tumbling to the bottom again. I groan, winded. Gritting my teeth, I get up and try again, this time edging left a little where the ground felt slightly firmer.

My leg roars in pain, begging for me to stop, especially when I crane my knee too high. I ignore it, biting back the agony.

I had to this. I had to. It was either try or stay here and die. And I refused to allow it to be the latter.

“I can do this.” I chant to myself, panting hard. “Keep going, Charlotte.”

I manage to get halfway up this time and my right foot begins to slide from its position. Digging deep, I move it quickly, pressing it firmly into place. Sweat beads at my brow as I

reach out and my fingers brush against the straggly root. I grab hold of it, gripping hard for dear life, testing its strength a brief second. I take the plunge, lugging myself upward with all my strength until I manage to swing an arm over the lip of the pit, and then the other.

A grin splits across my face, victorious. I hang there for a minute to catch my breath before finally swinging my legs up and over onto mossy green grass.

I lay there for a moment, staring up at the sky in wonderment. My arms are burning, every muscle tight and knotted. My shoulders feel like they are on the brink of dislocating.

A soft laugh rolls from my throat and I sling an arm over my face, pleased with myself. How long I lay there for, I don't know, but some voice within urges me to get up and start moving. I couldn't stay here for too long like this. I needed to find the others again, as soon as possible. Despite their reluctance to stay and help me, I still needed them. Alone out here I would surely die. We needed to stick to together. Safety in numbers and all that.

Climb unsteadily to my feet, I glance around for inspiration. I find it in the shape of a twisted gnarled stick buried amongst the shrubbery. I pick it up, snapping off some of its leaves. It wasn't quite the right size or height, but it would do for now.

Leaning on it, I begin my trek through the forest, hoping to find some sign of the group and hopefully water.

Memnis POV

So, the female had managed to escape. *Impressive* . She was, after all, such a tiny creature and not even the strongest of the alien males had been able to survive such trap. Yet she had. *Yeyinde* , they called it in his mother tongue. 'Brave one'. This tiny hooman had courage. Memnis was already eager to return to his brothers and tell them about his observations. Although they would be displeased to see he had ignored their orders, he knew that this one was far too interesting to walk away from.

Through the shadows, he slowly follows her. His sleek shape glides effortlessly from one tree to another, silent and swift as a wind. A rush of heat slips through his warrior's blood at the thrill of stalking his prey. A true hunter, through and through. At one point, she wanders directly below his crouched position and he can scent her upon the air. Sweat and blood, mingled with the sweetness of a fertile female.

She traipses through the tall grass of the golden fields. With each step, large *Tevavin* insects fly up at her approach, scattering about her frame. She swats at them mindlessly with her staff, meaning more to discourage them away than to actually do them any harm. Memnis hears her growl of frustration as they swarm around her, yet still, she does not show a single

ounce of fear. Did she not know that those beady, flying gnats could paralyse her with one single sting? He wasn't entirely sure as to whether to think her foolish or fearless.

The hooman manages to find a small gathering of water and she takes the time to carefully test it with tiny sips. From his position, he can see the pale, smooth flesh of her claws, their tips blunt, completely useless. Her limbs are equally as smooth and slender, almost weak looking. Everything about her shouted *prey* to his mind. With her focus upon the water, it would have been so easy to set up another trap. She was so vulnerable out in the open like this, so unaware of his closeness and potential danger. The need to play with her itched at him. Memnis wanted to see what else she would do, what other tricks did she have to show him.

The hooman stands and begins to move again. Memnis follows, ever watchful. She ventures across the shallow waters of the misty river and onward to weave between the jutting rocks that his people named *the veil of daggers.* Every now and then she pauses, taking rest. At one point she freezes right in front him, swiftly diving being a thickened tree, hunkering low.

Memnis tilts his helmet in curiosity.

A *felina* prowls forward and into sight, a short distance away from the hiding female. The huge cat sniffs the air. Its smooth head and slitted eyes peer in her direction, sensing her.

The lengths of Memnis' claws clack together only to then flare with the strong desire to challenge the felina for his prize. This one was his prey, his to hunt. He would not share with the beast.

His mandibles flare into a grin when he sees the hooman reach down, grasping for a small rock. Deftly, she tosses the stone a short distance away. It crashes into the bushes, causing the cat to snap its head around. The creature hisses, sensing an unseen intruder. It stalks away into the opposite direction and then out of sight again.

The hooman's sigh of relief is loud, even to him. A soft trill rolls through his throat, pleased. It would seem his little female was clever too. He would certainly enjoy keeping this one around for a while.

Decision made, Memnis surges quietly ahead of her, keeping camouflaged within the gloom of the foliage. He rustles them a little, noticing the way her eyes fly up towards his location, sensing danger nearby. She edges towards the left and he quickly leaps across the space, deterring her from going in that direction too. The female, tense and alert, begins to walk east.

Good. It would take her a half a day's travelling before she would reach her herd, but once he'd regathered them all together again, then the real fun would begin. Chirping lowly in growing excitement, Memnis trails after her.

Come. Show us what else you can do, brave little female.

I feel eyes on me. Every step that I take I sense them burning into my back, sending goosebumps across my nape in warning. I turn around, for what seems like the millionth time to scan the area, only to find nothing there. I was alone. My mind reasons that if it were one of those beings, *a predator,* surely it would have attacked by now. Right?

My stomach rumbles, snapping me from my unease. God above, I would give my left arm for an apple or something right about now. Which was funny because I didn't even like them. I wasn't entirely sure what plants were safe to eat and what wasn't, so I decided to wait. Nothing looked even remotely familiar to me.

I sigh, hungry and tired to point of grumpiness. I hadn't slept a wink last night and I was certainly beginning to feel the effects of it. My feet stumble a step and my head swims a little. Temptation urges me to sit down and take a rest but now was not the time. I had to keep on going and find the others, otherwise, I was going to—

Something rustles up ahead. I hear low voices speaking, barely audible. One, in particular, sounds eerily familiar and my heart leaps a beat.

Is that who I think it is? Surely it wasn't... I'm not usually that lucky.

I lean heavily on my stick, quickening my step to approach the sound. A huge wall of overgrown branches block my way and I hastily bat at it, trying to force my way through. I surge out the other side, only to draw to an abrupt stop to find a crowd of recognisable faces peering me, with a few guns pointed in my direction.

"Charlotte?" Jason steps closer, disbelief dawning across his tanned face. He looks exactly like how I feel right now – like shit. His face is all scratched up and dirtied. Dark circles are drawn around his weary, but suddenly wide eyes.

I sigh, shoulders slumping in relief. "Oh my god, I can't believe it's you. You're here."

Croydon straightens, lowering his gun, as do the others. His shaved head tilts at me, equally as surprised to see me standing there. His icy gaze slides around the treeline before narrowing on me again. Cautious.

All of a sudden, Jason is there, drawing me into his arms. I slump against him, more out of tiredness than joy at seeing him.

"Holy fuck, Lottie. How the hell did you make it out of the trap? I thought you were dead."

No thanks to you , I wanted to say, but held my tongue. Now was not the time for bickering, I had no energy for such things.

"Are you all right? Are you hurt?" Jason says, scanning me for injuries.

I shake my head. "No, I'm fine, just tired. It's been a long night."

He releases me, still clearly overcome with shock. “I can’t believe this is happening. When… How are you even here? This is crazy.”

“You have no idea,” I mutter in agreement, leaning against my staff as a shard of pain lances through my thigh.

“You know, I was planning to stay and help you, Lottie. I swear. It’s just--”

I cut him off quickly. “It’s fine, Jay. Let’s not talk about it now. I just want to--”

“You can’t be here.”

At those firm words, I freeze and slowly turn to face Croydon. His glare burns into me and I find myself swallowing thickly, a knot of dread curling in my belly.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me, you can’t stay here. How did you find us?” Once again his eyes peer about as though seeking an answer amongst the forest flora.

I am stunned into silence. After spending all this time trying to find them and now they were turning me away? Surely he wasn’t being serious?

“What the fuck, man. Are you serious?” Jason jumps to my defence, scowling at the other man. “She’s my girlfriend, you can’t tell her to go.”

“I can and I will.” Came the curt reply.

“She’s coming with us,” Jason declares angrily. “She’s a woman and needs protecting.”

The others shuffle around, edging closer in curiosity. Alicia moves to stand beside Croydon, forever his right-hand person. Her slightly masculine features tighten in displeasure, delving into Jason with clear dislike.

Croydon flashes him a snide grin. “Oh come on, Kid. Are you really that blind? Look around you.” He gestures wide with his arms. “She fell into a trap that should have killed her, and yet here she is, right as rain. Not only that, but she managed to find her way here to us. Do you honestly think that is by pure chance?”

I frown at that, snapping. “Excuse me? What are you trying to insinuate, exactly?” I point the end of my stick at him, dearly wishing to smack him around the head with it. “I’ve spent the last twenty-four hours in a living hell, crawling out of a fucking pit of dirt. I then walked for miles, trying to find you all, and now this? You have no idea what I’ve been through!”

“They spared you. Why didn’t they attack you?” He pushes past Jason, squaring up to me. I flinch back a little, intimidated by his larger size.

His question takes me aback. “I haven’t got a clue what you’re talking about.”

A long drawn out silence stretches between us, taut like a tightly sown thread, threatening to snap.

Croydon's gaze softens, only the slightest. His tone dips, thickening with sympathy. "Listen, princess, it's nothing personal. Honest. Here, it is survival of the fittest. By coming back to find us, you've put us all in danger and I cannot allow that."

I lean back in surprise about to reply when the Russian woman beats me to it.

"They've followed her here." The comment slams down around us like a heavy rock, realisation dawning. "She's led the Yautja straight to us. They know we're here."

"I haven't, I swear!" I say desperately, "I haven't seen any sign of the hunters at all. If I had don't you think I'd be dead by now?"

"She has a point." It was Li who spoke up this time from the rear of the group, his English somewhat imperfect.

"But why didn't they attack you?" Croydon repeats again, though this time it's more to himself than to me. He seems disturbed by the fact and yet curious at the same time.

"I don't know," I bite out sarcastically, "maybe next time, instead of running for my life, I'll sit down and ask them over some tea and biscuits."

His quietness is unsettling. I can see the determination germinating across his countenance, a shadow of certainly spreading in the depths of his cerulean eyes.

"Please, Jasper," I beg to him, softening my tone. "Don't do this. I won't be a burden to any of you, I promise--"

"You already are." His words stab into me hard and my bottom lip begins to tremble. "I don't know why or how you're here, whatever the reason, you can't be here with us. *They've* taken an interest in you."

Anxiety spears at me and I grab a hold of the front of his camouflage shirt. "Damn it, I'm a person too, asshole! I deserve to survive just as much as the rest of you. Who are you to judge my worth as a person, huh?"

He grabs my wrist, yanking my arm away from him. I let go and sheer dread clogs in my throat like dry sand.

"I won't risk this mission, not for you or anyone."

Mission? I frown at that. What frickin' mission? We're in the middle of a fucking jungle on a foreign planet, for fuck sake!

"You're not welcome here," Alicia says coolly.

I turn to her and the others, seeing the same firm resignation in their faces.

I shake my head slowly, almost to the point of tears. “I can’t believe you’re doing this.”

“Believe what you like, our decision is final,” Croydon says, sliding his gun back into position on his belt before reaching for one of the heavy-looking bags. He gestures to the others before turning to walk away. “Everyone, gather your things, we need to keep moving.”

They begin to move, following after him. Some send me a saddened nod of goodbye, whilst others don’t even spare me a second glance. I look to Jason, beyond stunned. He shifts on his feet, uncertain. To my horror he grabs for his own bag, swinging it up over his shoulder.

“Jason?” I say his name, merely a whisper. A plea.

Surely, he wouldn’t leave me again. Right? Not a second time. Not him.

“I erm...” He stammers for a minute, glancing between me and the others striding away into the bushes.

His thoughts are obvious, as though he was projecting them directly to me. He was weighing up the chances of his own survival, trying to decide on the best option. It was either stay with them or take a chance with me. And I could see easily who the losing party was going to be.

“I thought we were in this together, Jason,” I whisper. “You’re the reason why I’m here to begin with…” I trial off as a sob hits me.

“I know. I’m sorry, Lottie. But I have to do this,” he says, pausing for a moment. “You understand that, right?”

I say nothing, completely frozen with despair.

“I love you.”

He says it like he’s ordering a coffee from Starbucks, without any emotion. My chest tightens in turmoil. I refuse to say it back to him. What’s the point.

“Goodbye Charlotte.”

And just like that, he spins away from me, rushing after the others like a pup that has lingered too far from its pack. Their footsteps fade away, leaving me alone in the deafening quietness.

How long I stand there, simply staring at the greenery, I don’t know. A strange numbness descends, to the point where I no longer even feel the awful ache in my leg any more. Tears that hover at the edge of my vision fall, streaking down my cheeks. Every limb begins to tremble, overcome with stress.

In my head, I’m replaying every Christmas spent with Jason at my side, every birthday, every hospital visit and days laid in bed watching Netflix together. Seven years of closeness, and all for nothing. It was worth absolutely *nothing*. I was completely alone now, with no one on this world or another to connect to.

A droplet of rain falls from the sky overhead and its huge, easily the size of a marble. It splashes against my bare arm, incredibly hot like boiling water. It wakes me from the chaos of my thoughts as another one falls, and then another.

In a daze, I slide under a thick canopy of leaves, needing protection from the growing shower. I hiss when another drop hits me on the forehead, burning against my brow.

Stumbling, I wander mindlessly further into the forest, keeping under cover as much as possible.

A loud snap comes from somewhere behind me, slightly to the left. So I edge right, making my way through the thorny bushes, no longer having the care or energy to run. Another rustling comes, directly beside me this time. I whimper, shivering, more from shock than cold.

I push my way through a curtain of dangling vines, only to come out at a small clearing. There at the far end lies a wide gap amongst the rocks. A cave, perhaps? The opening seems to beckon to me like a mother holding her arms out in welcome.

My knees buckle as I enter the wide space, delving into the deep gloom inside. Cold stone surrounds me from all sides and I lean a hand against it, sliding down to lay against the slightly damp ground. The area is dark and musty, offering little warmth, but I don't care anymore. None of it matters.

I curl into myself, wrapping my arms around my knees as the tears begin to fall in earnest now. A loud sob erupts, echoing loudly before falling back into a deadened silence.

Through the fog of my despair, I sense rather than see, another presence nearby. Something moves at the edge of my vision and I half-heartedly lift my head to see a familiar shadow lurking at the threshold of my sanctuary. Glowing eyes peer at me through the darkness. The four-legged lizard-like beast prowls closer, hovering a short distance away. The hound snorts, sniffing at the air, watching me with an eerily bright intensity.

I stare at it as fear constricts around my insides like a snake. Defeated, I drop my head back down and pray for my death to come swiftly. I don't want it to be painful.

I wait with bated breath, yet nothing happens. The beast doesn't approach. A long drawn out whistle splits the air and it retreats with a low snarl, disappearing out of sight.

My vision swims. The world whirls for a moment and then I close my eyes, succumbing to the darkness. My last thought is that I wish to fall into sleep and never wake up again.

Chapter 4

Memnis' POV

The female sleeps still, not yet emerging from the depths of her stony dwelling. The cave is small but large enough for Memnis to easily enter, yet he doesn't approach. Instead, he'd tested her, sending in his favoured *Daku* hound, intending to flush the hooman out of her hiding place. Her fear had been strong, a stench upon the air, yet she hadn't fled or come forth. All through the darkened hours, he had heard her mewling cries, like that of a wounded animal. It reminded him a suckling crying for its mother's teat, pleading and soft. In the shadows he had waited, settling amongst his perch in the trees when the sounds drift away, falling into silence. The hooman makes no further noise, yet he knows she is still there, waiting for the dawn to come. Sleeping.

Alone, she was vulnerable to every element and beast that hunted her. Her mate had abandoned her; a fact Memnis was finding hard to acknowledge. He'd seen such dishonour played out amongst other species, but only between other males. Usually for competitive means. For what cowardly male would dare the leave behind a mate? Such an idea was abhorrent to him. Such a disgusting show of weakness would not have been accepted by his own blood and kin.

From his spot, Memnis slowly shakes his head, a low growl rattling through his armoured chest. None of it mattered, in truth. For now, the female was separated from her people. The perfect target. The great spirits were clearly shining upon him this day. It would be so easy to take her. And even though she were merely prey, the temptation was oddly appealing to him.

The female would have to relent soon, it was inevitable. She would need sustenance if she was to survive the wilds of the jungle. Her kind was not as resilient as his own. Soft-meats were weak and prone to illness and disease. But if there was one thing Memnis did know, it was that their spirit was strong. The need for survival would arise and she would venture forth from her den. And when she did, he would be ready for her.

The sun rises, peeking across the sky and Memnis waits, ever the patient hunter that he is.

And then, there she is...

She comes, a small figure stepping forth from the cave on unsteady, weary feet. Memnis is once again struck by the sight of her, of how small in stature she is. With her flaming mane and alien pale skin, she stands out against the flora around her like a flame in the darkness. Despite her ugliness, something in him stirs.

This one they would keep for a while. Perhaps even keep her as a pet. Neither he nor his brothers had ever kept a soft meat before, but the idea of this one, in particular, belonging to them sent a shiver of approval down his spine.

His mandibles flare behind his visor. A grin forms. He liked the idea. He liked it very much.

I lay there against the hard, cool ground, disorientated and weary to the bone. Even just attempting to sit upright makes my head swim. My stomach churns with the motion. After being so long without eating something, I no longer feel the pangs of hunger, only curling nausea. I rub at my eyes with somewhat dirtied hands, trying to take in my surroundings. The hellish reality that was my life comes rushing at me full force and I groan in despair. I should have stayed asleep, I think to myself glumly.

All through the night I'd tossed and turned, troubled even in sleep. I dreamt of being in a canoe with my father; a favourite pastime of ours during the summer vacations whilst he'd been alive. God bless his soul. Even in dreams, I could remember every single detail about him. The familiar warm eyes. The dark short hair and soothing voice.

"*I miss you,"* I recall saying to him.

"*I miss you too, sweetheart. You wouldn't believe how much."*

"*I want to stay here with you,"* I'd asked, pleading.

He'd looked at me with that gentle, loving look; one that always made me feel loved and adored. *"You can't, precious. You have to wake up."*

"*I don't want to be alone anymore."* The admission had been pitiful, echoing with pain even though it wasn't real. *"I'm tired, dad…. So, so tired."*

"*I know, honey,"* he'd answered, leaning over to take my hand. I can't feel his fingers touching me and a pang of sadness stabs at me. *"But you're not alone. I'm always with you, no matter what.*

I shake my head, not truly believing him.

"*Wake up, Charlotte."* He nudges, insistent, and I can sense myself rousing, emerging to the world of the living.

"*Please, don't go."* I try and reach for him.

"*It's time to go."* The words whisper to me and the last thing I manage to see is his gentle eyes delving into me. "… *They're waiting for you."*

"*Who?"*

I'd asked the question too late as my eyes flew open and a roughened stone ceiling meets my gaze. Tears prickle against my lashes as I peer around the darkened, damp cave around me. The sharp brightness of the sun outside peeks into the opening of the dwelling. I rub at my arms, trying to clear the grit and mud embedded against my skin there. I pull myself up on unsteady feet, glancing down to notice that my tights are pretty much non-existent on my bared legs. The holes are so large now that most of my thighs and calves are bared. Completely useless. I draw them down and then toss them aside, silently wishing I had a pair of shoes of some kind to protect my already sore feet.

Where I intended to go, I did not know. There was nowhere to go. I had no idea of which direction to take. Part of me wanted to stay within the cave and just wait, hoping that someone might come along and find me. But that was stupid. If I stayed here, I would die. If I got lost in the jungle or attacked by a beast, I would also die. It was a difficult decision to make. Only one thing was for certain; I wanted to go home. I wanted to be back with my friends in my little house and back to my boring job in the banking office. Anywhere but here. I didn't want to die here. I didn't want to be forgotten about. The others had discarded me and there wasn't anything I could do about it. I couldn't just stay here. I needed to find a way back home; regardless of how small the chance of that occurring would be.

I sigh, uncertain. I reach down for my stick and carefully hobble out to the mouth of the cave. I peer out at the jungle around me, taking in every sight and sound, wary of any potential danger nearby. With little else to do, I start to wander in an unknown direction, stepping through the overgrown foliage carefully. At first, everything seems fine, nothing is amiss. But as I progress further into the forest an eerie sort of quietness settles around me like a shroud, throbbing and alive. All of the birds above my head have drawn to an abrupt silence, causing me to grow even more unsettled. The skin of my nape begins to tingle in silent warning.

I'm not alone… I can feel it.

I lift my face to scan every shadow and shape, wary. Something cracks from behind me and I spin, holding my stick aloft. My eyes widen to find… nothing. Nothing is there.

Odd.

Something lands on the breast of my dress and I frown, looking down at the bright red flare of light drifting across my person. It's cast there by a thin beam of light that was coming directly from one the bushes nearby.

A low clicking sounds and I freeze, immobilised with fear. My heart leaps as a large, bulky figure prowls forward and into sight, revealing itself to my gaze. A scream rises in my throat, only to become trapped. Sheer terror grips me and I edge back a step, and then another.

The hunter before me is not one that I recognise. He's big, but not anywhere near are big as the other ones I'd seen. I can't see its face, it shrouded by one of those steel-grey helmets they were often seen wearing. This ones was dented slightly and scuffed, yet still equally as menacing.

I retreat even further until my back makes contact with the thickened tree trunk behind me. My fingers, trembling so badly, slacken and drop my stick. Thick, gnarling claw-like fingers grip a gleaming blade. It's intent clear.

I don't even have time to consider fleeing when the creature roars and lunges at me. I shriek, hunkering low with my arms up in a desperate attempt for protection. His arm is raised, ready to plunge the knife into my flesh. He almost upon me.

A heavy thud sounds and the floor vibrates under my feet. I peek open my eyes and find the hunter rearing back with a furious growl, but it's not aimed at me. Its due to the fact there is a

barrier now in his way; a long, crudely-crafted spear now embedded and shuddering in the ground directly in the space between my body and my attacker's.

The creature's massive head snaps up and he bellows a roar. I tilt my head to follow his gaze and take sight of the figure crouched amongst the branches.

Now, this hunter I do recognise. It was the same one from before, one from the group who had attacked Jason and the others. Though sleeker in appearance, our new arrival was easily larger than the first male. His black helmet tips, focussed entirely upon the other hunter and I get the feeling he's not pleased to see him. There are slight differences in their style of armour and only one of them carries the reddened handprint symbol upon their helmet, which tells me quickly that they are not a part of the same clan.

An array of clicks and growls permeates the air as they communicate with one another. I stiffen, anxious to know what they're saying, yet somewhat glad that I can't. What if they're discussing who gets to kill me? Maybe they're negotiating who gets to have my head. I shiver at the thought and sweat dampens around my hairline, trailing down between my breasts.

Their exchange becomes tense, their garbling noises rising in crescendo, teetering on the brink of aggression.

The one above gestures down to me with a gnarling claw. The other shakes his head, crouching low as if preparing for a fight. He surges towards me again, almost within reaching distance, until something whizzes past my shoulder. It skims so close to my body that I feel the air stir against my dress, flicking at a lock of hair. I jerk with a yelp of surprise, drawing into stillness as another spear joins and crosses against the other, creating a clear X. A shield between me and certain death.

I gasp. Eyes wide, I snap around to find two more hulking figures amongst the foliage, silently watching the exchange. Jesus Christ, where were they all coming from? My fear creeps even higher. From what little I could gather, these two were with the other marked predator. There was clearly a dispute going on and it was three against one.

The largest of all of them jumps down with a thud, spreading his bulging arms wide in invitation. His rumbling snarls are terrifying, unlike anything I have ever heard before. He doesn't even draw out a blade of his own. Instead, he seems eager to fight with his bare claws like a savage beast that he is.

I sense, rather than see, the foliage above me shifting. I manage to find the courage to look up and almost shriek aloud to find the black-clad hunter merely an arms-length away from my person. Agilely, he squats low until his knee is almost brushing against the side of my head. Danger clings to him, tight like a finely fitted glove. I can feel his heat. His scent a mixture of muskiness and something metallic. All he would have to do is reach down and I'd be screwed. I slide down a little against the bark, almost sitting against the floor in an attempt to create some much-needed distance.

I wait, slowly losing my mind with dread. I was quite literally surrounded by four blood-thirsty killers. I had no idea what was going to happen.

The first hunter snarls again, refusing to bow down to the others. He charges at me again and then all chaos erupts. The trio spring into action, vaulting down and rushing forward in a unified attack of their own. Metal sings, slicing through flesh. Wetness spurts against my left leg and I cringe to find bright yellow fluid sprayed against my skin. Blood? I gag, covering my mouth as bile rises into my throat.

Everything is happening so fast. I can't keep up. My head is swimming.

An inhuman shriek sounds as the larger male shoves his whole arm right through his opponent's chest cavity. His hand plunges out through the other side, claws gripping at the knobbly white curvature of a spine. The lone hunter falls to the ground at their feet, defeated. All three of them throw their heads back and bellow in victory.

Ok, now it's time to go. I nudge myself to awareness, forcing my frozen legs to move. With the three aliens so engrossed in their howling, I take the moment to slink away. I do not dare to take the time to reach for my fallen staff. I had to escape. Now.

I stumble away into the bushes, not once looking back. Adrenaline and terror gives me wings, forcing me to keep moving. I rush blindly not thinking about where I am heading. I surge through a curtain of vines, only to end up amongst a thick gathering of plants. I cough and splutter as a plume of strange yellow dust rises up swim around my body. It settles over my skin like a rash. Burning. I keep forging forward, sweeping my arms through the mass, desperate to make my way through. Absently, as I spin my head around to look for danger, I notice the tall bright purple flowers towering around me. More of their pollen clogs in my nostrils, cloying and unpleasant. I edge past them, trying to think. Croydon had mentioned something about purple plants, I was sure of it. But what? I couldn't rightly remember.

A terrible ache settles across my jaw, spreading all the way down my neck and farther into my chest. Goosebumps prickle and I shiver as if cold, even though I feel incredibly warm. Heat flushes across my thighs and arms, the skin there tightening, suddenly incredibly sensitive. I try to ignore the sensation and continue to run, even though each step is becoming more difficult. More heavy.

All the while, I can still hear the three hunters braying out their victory. The noise echoing and loud. Frightening. I only prayed that they wouldn't follow after me.

Yaknaur's POV

He'd killed the other Yautja male with ease and nothing could have satisfied him more. The other hunter had been young and foolish, challenging them for the right to their chosen prey.

What a fool.

Trilling in pride, Yaknaur grips the spine in his claws harder, holding it aloft for all to see. For days now he'd been starving for a good fight and as soon as Memnis had alerted them to an intruder within their territory, he knew his opportunity had come. The younger warrior had

tried to dishonour them and now he was no more. Rendered to mere nothingness by Yaknaur's own skilful hands.

Yaknaur hisses a grunt, seething slightly. The hooman female was theirs to hunt, no one would take her from them. Scorching fire lurches within his groin at the thought. His violent urges rising to the fore, seeking to be appeased. His need to destroy was strong, as was his need to conquer. The short battle had left him unfulfilled and craving the need for more. More teared flesh. More corpses. A female to rut. Spilling blood always had that effect on him. It fed his lusts in ways that made him a prime choice to Yautja females. His strength and roughness lured them to him and when the opportunity arose, he was only too happy to unleash it upon them. There was no better feeling than pinning a fertile female down and breeding her over and over again until she collapsed from exhaustion.

During the suns early rise, his brother, Memnis had reported to them of the hooman's whereabouts and though he had no great interest in her, he couldn't help but purr with a note of excitement. She'd survived their trap. How interesting…

"My blood is singing," Sin'chila rumbles, wiping his bloodied blade against the ground. "This one was weak, but certainly worth the effort."

Yaknaur nods, nudging a foot against the corpse at his feet. "Tis only a pity it ended so quickly."

All three of them chuckle lowly, basking in their joint triumph.

Memnis purrs, the sound somewhat pleased. Playful. "The little female tries to flee from us, my brothers. What are we to do about that?"

As if he had to ask. Already scenting the air, Yaknaur sought her out amongst the wilderness, tracking her with every sense. His acute hearing could make out the faint raging pound of her heartbeat. Each footstep was like a drum beat, revealing her location to him easily. She was moving fast away from them, but not fast enough for skilled hunters such as they. They would find her.

"She can try," Yaknaur rumbles, his body rippling, eager for the chase to come.

Both he and Memnis look to Sin'Chila, waiting for his signal to begin. He hesitates, reluctant. He does not show the same fire for this hunt as his brothers do. Yet despite his obvious disinterest, Yaknaur knows he would never deny them.

The slow incline of his helmet is enough. Needing no further encouragement, Yaknaur and Memnis stalk their way into the foliage, following the female's trail.

Chapter 5

I can barely see where I'm going now, but somehow I manage to find my way back to the cave. As soon as my hand lays upon a rocky wall, I crumple to the floor, panting hard. My skin is on fire, it’s as if someone has doused me in petrol and set me alight. The aching in my body goes bone-deep, almost feverish in its intensity. Each rasping intake of breath causes my side to spasm.

What in the hell is happening to me?

I claw at the dirty ground, crawling further inside. I try to gather myself, to slow the racing of my heart. I can hear it pounding away in my ears, deafening with its loudness. I clutch at the fabric of my dress, tugging at it weakly. It's too tight, stifling even, practically suffocating against my flesh. I can't bear it. With some struggle, I begin to yank it over my head and the friction of its soft material alone being dragged against my back is torture. I toss it aside and the cool air licks at my bared limbs, soothing like a balm. I'm only clad in my underwear now – a black lacy bra and pair of knickers – but I don't care. It’s still too much. Too heavy.

Shudders wrack my frame and helpless against them, I curl up against the floor, seeking its coldness. Sickly sweetness is still clogged inside of my nose and throat. Light yellow dust still clings to my skin like glitter. Only this wasn't a party, and I certainly wasn't having any fun right now. In fact, I felt like I was dying.

The world spins in a whirl of colours around me. My head flies back as terrible cramps attack my every muscle, sending me into a seizure of pain. Through the agony, a dull throb begins to grow from deep within my belly. Insistent. Awakening into something more. My naked thighs unconsciously rub together, needing to ease the foreign ache forming between them. The air feels thin, I can barely catch my breath.

My breasts grow heavy and my nipples bead through my bra, tight and sensitive even to the slightest wind. I ache, needing relief of some kind. With a low moan, I roll over onto my back and lay there, trying to centre myself, to think clearly. The length of my legs are restless, moving of their own accord. My hips soon join in with their dance, rolling and undulating.

Jesus fucking christ, I'm so horny. I've never felt like this before in my entire life. Never. Not even with Jason.

Wetness is blooming against my crotch, my arousal strong. Lost in my delirium, my hand finds its way between my legs, slipping into my underwear. I hiss at how impossibly hot I feel against my own fingertips. My folds are swollen, thick with need. I find the fleshy nub of my clitoris and nearly cry out at how tender it is. I stroke at it tentatively, my knees parting in a silent desire for more contact.

I give a low groan and the sound echoes back to me loudly. My head lolls, turning to face towards the threshold of the cave, only to find I wasn't alone any more...

Huge shadows dance and stretch across the rocky walls, spreading their way across my prone figure like a blanket. The three hulking figures prowl forward towards me. Like mountains, they take up every inch of space, making me feel small and endangered. Had I have been of a saner mind, I would have crawled back away from them. But nothing, not even the ending of the universe itself, could have stopped me from rubbing at myself. I couldn't. Over and over I tug and pat at my clit, my pussy tightening around emptiness. Fear and lust are a fearsome, deadly concoction streaming through my blood.

Tear swim within my eyes and then trickle down my cheeks. As a unit, like a pack of wolves on the hunt, they move to stand over me. Around me. Caging me in.

“Please...” I whisper to them, my voice raspy with need and terror. I don't know what I'm asking for, or even sure they understand me. If they intend to kill me, I needed them to do it now and put me out of this misery. “Make it stop....”

None of them move. The smooth faces of their helmets peer down at me, still as statues. Their postures confident and suddenly, oddly, appealing in their strangeness. My mind saw them as monsters, but my body recognised them as virile and male.

I whimper again, my hand moving in earnest now against my sex, trying to chase down the climax even as they watch me. Out of nowhere, my peak begins to rush at me, hard and fast like a storm. And just as my pussy begins to spasm, something strange begins to happen...

The predators, the three monstrous creatures towering over me, begin to purr.

Memnis' POV

The little female's mewling cries are unlike anything Memnis had ever heard before. He'd heard the crying of the dying and the wounded, but this was different. More heady to his senses. The heavy musk of her scent is nigh on drowning him, making his blood like fire in his veins. She was in heat, that much was for certain. Her small, smooth body writhes upon the ground, almost enticing. He feels his body hardening at the sight. His gaze settles upon the apex of her thighs, watching in interest as she paws at herself with clawless fingers.

“What does she do, brother?” Memnis asks, curious.

Yaknaur and Sin'Chila are as silent as a carcass, equally as transfixed by the sight as he was. Her heat source is blazing high, more prominent amongst the slit of her *snat*. The hooman body was of no mystery to him, he'd carved and dismembered enough to know the workings of their anatomy. But the female flesh before him was an enigma. Crouching down, Memnis looks closer, eyeing her sex with interest. Unlike their own females, this ones snat is slightly reddened with arousal and swollen. Pinken flaps of flesh surround a moistened hole that clenches under his assessing watch. Her frantic petting, he notices, is focussed more around the tiny, lumpy protrusion at the top.

She emits a sound, soft and pleading, and it sends his arousal spiking even higher. He begins to trill, a sound considered soothing and appealing. Although she does not show the aggression of a female wanting to be mated, instinctively, some deep part of him recognises the calling.

“She craves to mate,” Sin'Chila grunts from beside him, his posture stiff. “She is *ig'nara*.” *Ready to accept her male. “*Keep your distance.”

Despite his leader's warning, Memnis hears him trilling as well, just as affected by the wanton creature as he was. Could a warrior mate with one of their kind? He'd never heard of it being done before. His claws reach out to her, tempted to test out the theory. Before he can make contact with her glistening flesh, she is swept away from him, dragged across the floor by Yaknaur.

Memnis growls at his older brother, quietly seething for having her taken from him so suddenly.

“If it is a warrior's seed she craves then I shall give it to her,” Yaknaur rumbles, drawing her tiny body under his. He flips her over onto all fours, forcing her into position for being mounted. His massive shape bends over her. His claws begin to rip at his coverings, eager to free his erect *ih'cros*.

The hooman whines again, uttering incoherent words. She presses back, grinding her rump against Yaknaur as if greedy for his taking.

“No,” Sin'Chila hisses, his mandibles clicking fast in anger. “We do not mate with their kind.” He sounds both disgusted and interested by the idea.

Yaknaur stiffens, loosening his hold on the female’s hip, rising higher to his knees. “You only say this because you wish to claim her first.”

“Never!”

“I can smell your musk, brother. You wish to breed her, just as much we do. Do not deny it!”

Both he and Sin’Chila share a long, exchanging look. One of them rumbles a light snarl and the other responds with one of their own.

“She is ripe and ready for us,” Yaknaur argues gruffly. “So let us take her. Why should we hesitate?”

“Imagine what spawn that would bring forth,” Sin’Chila insists firmly. “Such an abomination will not be created. It *cannot.*” His meaning and command was clear, refusing to be denied.

Finally yielding, Yaknaur huffs his displeasure before shifting away and then standing. His growl is thunderous, echoing even as he strides away and out of the cave.

Ever the silent spectator, Memnis’ focus is fixed entirely upon the writhing female. His own shaft is solid and firm, primed for rutting, but something else is stirring within his breast. A strange protectiveness for this small creature, who have survived the harsh wilds and even the

trappings of their own making. She was *Yeyinde* – a brave one. She'd outsmarted her fate of death, something that he found favourable. And with that came a daring urge. Despite the refusals of their leading brother, part of him wanted to watch Yaknaur mate with her. He wanted to stake his own claim on her too, to play with her. He wanted to see her belly swell with his young.

Yes, he decided then. She would make a good mate. But first, he would need to somehow convince Sin'Chila to let them keep her. With that mischievous thought in mind, he rose to his feet as well.

"She's yours," he says smoothly with complete calmness. Without another word, he follows after his sibling and out of the cave, leaving his eldest kin to deal with the hooman alone.

Sin'Chila's POV

She's yours. As soon as his younger brother had uttered the words a shard of possessiveness had slashed at Sin'chila's gut. *Grekt* to him and his sneaky cleverness. Both of his kin knew very well of the conflicting thoughts roaming through his mind. Yet still, they persisted. They wanted the female. And he was beginning to see why…

Never before had he seen a female so responsive. When Yaknaur had left her side, she had whined like a pup, seeking him out and feeling the loss of him. Which only availed in confusing Sin'Chila further. Females were supposed to be aggressive in their search for a mate, but this one, this hooman, was all submissiveness and pleading. Soft and accepting, ready to take anything they would give to her.

He hisses, inhaling her scent. The stench of the *yati* plant still clings to her like a second skin, reminding him once again of the issue at hand. Though its flower was not toxic to his kind, it was to hers. She would not be at rest until its influence had left her system. He could see she was controlled by its power, helpless against her most basic urges. His chest expands at the sight of her helplessness, his shaft growing as sheer bestial need spears through his groin like a fiery blade.

No. He steadies himself. He would not be swayed by this creature, no matter how tempting she may seem. The blood pool of his kin was a strong one, as old as time itself. He would not pollute it by allowing his brothers to spread their seed into such a weakened, lesser being. They were warriors. Hunters, through and through. Their sons would only be bred and born by strong, able Yautja child-makers. There was no other way.

He begins to turn, intending to leave the female to her fate, only to still at her low cry. Her pale back arches, an eerily sensual movement. She keeps pawing at herself, frantic. The short, slender lengths of her claws disappear into the gushing tightness of her hole and suddenly he is lost to the sight of it. The slick sound of her flesh is a sweet poison to his senses.

He moves closer and as soon as he crouches at her side, she grabs for him. The deep warning snarl he gives her fades away into a steady trill when she all but fastens herself to his front.

The feel of her alien body against his is unsettlingly pleasing. Everything about it is soft, even her mane that drifts against his chest.

“Please,” she gasps again as moisture leaks from her eyes.

Please. He knows this word well enough. He'd heard it often when his prey would beg for him to spare their pitiful lives. Mercy. She craved for mercy from him, but in a different form.

Take her. The need strikes him with all the swiftness of a killing strike.

He reaches for her, testing his claws against her rounded rump. She makes a sound but doesn't move away. It feels soft and smooth, yet it does not tear when he trails a sharpened tip against its curve. He journeys further down, seeking the source of her wetness. The clenching heat of her snat. She's so incredibly warm.

She whimpers and his own rasping growl answers the call. He finds her tight opening and slowly slides his way into her...

I don't know what's happening any more. I cannot think. I can barely see a thing. My head is all over the place, consumed by the devastating need that’s threatening to drown me in its depths. I feel the heat of a body against mine, solid and large, yet when I try to look all I can see is a dark, towering shape. A hot breath plumes against the side of my face as leathery-textured fingers delve their way into my cunt.

I don't know who it is, but I know its one of *them, y*et still, I cannot bring myself to care. I need this. I need to be fucked. *Now.*

Knelt, I spread my legs wider, offering closer contact. My face presses forward into a powerful chest, my cheek rubs against my mysterious companion like a cat seeking attention. The tight walls of my pussy tighten around him, trying to grip and suck him deeper. Through the fog, I barely register the low purr rumbling against the top of my head. My hips buck, diving down, riding against the flesh burrowed into mine. A hardened body curls over me, surrounding me a cocoon of warmth.

Desperation crawls into me and I drop one of my hands down to join his against my sex. I'm so wet, it's almost embarrassing. I'm trembling, from need and fear. His claw is deep inside of my body. And though, whilst I feel no tearing pain, I am hyper-aware of the danger I'm in. I dare not move away, I don't want to. I make fast work against my clitoris, rubbing it furiously in a bid to quickly reach that ever-illusive orgasm.

The hunter – I shiver – seems to learn quickly, dipping in and out of my cunt in a steady rhythm that sets my thighs and belly on fire.

“Oh god, yes!” I groan, rolling my hips for more. “Just like that... don't stop.”

I undulate and grind into him. Hard. Faster. It's taking every inch of my willpower to just not bend over and spread myself open to him like a bitch in heat. And I would have. Deep down,

I knew I would have taken everything he had to give, and more besides. I would have ridden his alien dick and begged for more afterwards; and that by itself was a frightening thought. This wasn't like me at all.

Shifting, I grab hold of his thick wrist, keeping him locked to me as I fuck the length of his gnarled fingers. Barely a minute later, I am clawing at his shoulder, bouncing against him as if my very life depended on it. My bad leg is crying in protest, screaming out for rest.

Something tickles at my hair, sifting through the locks gently. That unfathomable purr is growing louder and louder, vibrating straight through to my bones.

“I'm gonna cum...” It comes out a strangled groan.

As if sensing my oncoming climax, the creature picks up the pace, charging into me almost brutally, forcefully. Pounding in and out, in and out. I gasp, burning, tightening even further. My walls start to flutter as I dance on that dangerous edge between torture and euphoria.

Another hand finds the back of my nape, firm and eerily possessive. It tightens in a silent demand, pinning me in place so that I have no choice but to let him have full control.

And then, I'm floating...

With a scream, wave after wave of pure pleasure rushes over me like a tide, sweeping me under with its power. I choke on air, scrambling to fight through every convulsion my pussy makes against the hand fucking it. I shudder hard, cumming even harder. Something warm shoots against the top of my bra and breasts, dripping down my belly in sticky rivulets.

It seems to go on and on, never stopping. My muscles are tiring, growing weak. My eyes begin to roll and to my alarm, I feel all my energy draining away from me. Heavily muscled arms grab me as I slump forward and fade away into sweet blackness.

Sin'Chila's POV

His flesh is dripping with wetness as he draws out of the females snat. Her musk, heavier now, is all over his skin. She'd marked him. And he, in turn, had marked her as well. The urge to stroke himself had been undeniable. He'd fisted himself tightly, emptying his sacks all over her small teats. His bright seed painted her; evidence of his weakness.

Hissing a breath, he cradles her to his breast, staring down at her. Already, he recognised the trouble that she would create for them all, just as much as he knew it was too late to walk away from her. Hooman's were to be hunted, to be prey... Except for this one, it would seem.

Carrying her out of the cave, Sin'Chila pauses directly before his brothers. They turn away from staring out at the horizon as he approaches.

Yaknaur straightens, inhaling deeply. “Next time, I get to go first.”

Next time. Those words echo between them, full of meaning.

Memnis tilts his head, his tone light and yet deep with knowing. “There will be plenty of time for breeding... for all of us. Yes, brother?” It was an open question. A request needing an answer.

A tension draws tight between them, a silent but brief form of communication only they could understand, expectant and strong from the bond of their blood. Glancing down at the hooman nestled against him, Sin'Chila rumbles a sound in reluctant agreement before passing her over into Memnis' keeping.

“She will be your responsibility.” Is all he says before striding away from them both.

Memnis and Yaknaur share a long look, nodding to one another in a small acknowledgement to their victory.

The female was theirs now. And death would come to any who would try and take her from them.

Chapter 6

My leg is paining me terribly, that's the first thing I notice upon awakening. I blink slowly, opening my eyes and instantly notice the smooth metal ceiling above me. I frown at it. My head is swimming and my entire body aches, which sends a shard warning bells ringing through my mind. I'm wearing some kind of strange make-shift tunic. Its fabric is a mixture of leather and netting that barely reaches my knees. I push upwards a little, leaning my palms against the floor as I kneel there trying to gather my senses. I look around, unable to recognise anything familiar amongst my surroundings. The walls of the room are bleak and clinical. Cold steel. Sluggish, I slump forward, only to be met by the cool metal of the bars in front of me.

Wait a minute… Bars?

I'm in a cage. My panic rises further as I lift a hand to the smooth metal, gripping it tightly as if trying to convince myself that they're not really there. The floor feels oddly warm beneath me as though heated.

I rub at my face, at a loss for words, trying to remember what had happened. Slowly, it all comes crashing back to me. The fight between the alien hunters. Of trying to run away and stupidly diving amongst a bunch of brightly coloured flowers. Ugh. I shiver as more memories surge to awareness. Images and phantom-touches of hands upon my body, giving me relief.

"Oh god," I groan to myself, scrubbing harder at my brow as though to will the thoughts away from me.

They'd found me, that much I could remember. One of them had also touched me. As to whether the creature had taken any further liberties, I don't know, but the space between my thighs did not feel overly sore or tender. I squirm, willing myself to try and think further after that, only to come up with nothing. Shame and horror dance hand in hand within my gut, tormenting me.

An unknown and very alien male had had his fingers inside my body … I close my eyes, my cheeks flushing with mortification. Someone kill me now.

Focusing, I peer around at the room again, taking in the large strange screens and the even larger glass window beyond them that took up the entire length of one side of the room. A landscape of wilderness waited beyond its barrier. Displays and strange symbols flashed across each screen. It kinda reminded me of those sleek control decks found on the Star Trek movies.

And then it sinks in…

That's exactly what they were. I was on a ship of some kind. The hunters must have taken me with them and this was their hideout. I was their captive now. God only knew what they would plan to do to me now. I shudder just thinking about it.

“Why does this always happen to me?” I whisper to myself, trying to keep my shit together. My entire length is shivering now as shock settles across my bones like an icy blanket.

I continue to glance around, gradually moving my head around to peer over my shoulder. My cage is spacious enough but still small, restricting movement, yet allowing me plenty of room to stand. I spot a single doorway – the only way in and out of the area.

I look to my right and then to my left, only to scream in fright at the silent black figure crouched inches away from the bars. I rear back, slamming up against them as the hunter's head tilts at me slowly. Curiously.

Holy shit, had he been there the whole time? I hadn’t even heard him.

It’s the smaller one of the trio, the one all covered in dark, leathery armour. Though primitive, it encases his entire frame in blackness, making him seem more like a moving shadow that a living, breathing being. But it’s not that which terrifies me the most. It’s his *face*… If that’s even what you want to call it.

The skin there is roughened and thickly mottled skin. Its ash-grey colouring is abnormal to my eyes, hideous even. What’s worse is the splaying finger-like projectiles of its jaw. His chin opens wide like a crab, shifting slowly as his blazing eyes burn into me without so much as a blink. Did he even have eyelids? I peer closer with increasing horror to try and find out. My lips are parted, choking on another scream as I take in the strange dread-lock like dark hair and the thickened pointed claws of his fingers.

I dare not blink. Instead, I stare at them, my stomach rolling as I try to imagine such flesh touching mine intimately.

Ugh…

I try to shift further back but I can’t get far, the cage is holding me in place. I can only sit there, knees tucked tight to my chest as the hunter watches me with the quietness of a predator.

“This can’t be happening. Please say this isn’t happening,” I chant to myself, my chest tightening with growing panic.

My hands grip the bars tight as the hunter simply crouches there, waiting. His elbows are placed against his knees and his claws flicker now and then. Those things look lethal enough to slice through granite.

The hunter leans forward and I edge back, cringing. An arm slides through the bars and reaches for me.

“Stay away from me.”

His hand brushes against my ankle and I lash out with a kick before curling further into the corner. My attack does little to deter the male. He stills, but for a brief moment, before surging forward again. He doesn’t bark out at all in anger. Instead, a strange purring trill

emits from his throat, as though amused with my antics. I try in earnest to evade him but somehow manage to get ensnared. I gasp as I'm all but dragged across the floor towards him, my bad leg pulled through to the other side of the bars for his inspection. My dress/tunic rises at the movement, flashing flesh.

I shriek again. "Hey! What the…!" To my growing horror, I realise my underwear is gone, I'm completely naked underneath. I clench my thighs closer and cover my crotch from his view.

Either I'm insane or completely insane, as I actually have enough nerve to land a fist against his shoulder for his rudeness. My attack bounces off his body as if it's nothing more than an inflated balloon. Completely useless. The alien continues to quietly observe my limb and foot, transfixed. His trill deepens as the pads of his gnarled fingers palpitate against the tender twisted muscles of my calf. I wince in pain and then yelp when he presses harder.

The hunter pauses at that and slides his focus to my face. His eyes are a solid colour of yellow, luminous and emotionless, yet highly intelligent. For what seems like an age we simply stare at one another; he in curiosity, and me in silent terror. My legs are trembling and I know without a doubt that he can feel it.

He huffs a grunt and suddenly releases me. Taking my moment, I scramble back away from his reach again. My eyes are glued to him, watching him warily. I half expect him to get up and walk away, praying that he would just so I could be left alone. Luck, however, did not seem to be on my side today.

I hear the scraping of the door and blink to find him unfastening the lock to my cage, sliding the bolt back. My heartbeat picks up in pace, my belly lurching as he opens it slightly. He doesn't come forward or step into my sanctuary. Instead, he edges back and crouches low again, only to launch up with the agility of a cat towards the roof of my prison. His heavy body lands above it with a thud that causes the solid structure around me to rattle and vibrate against my back. I can no longer see him now, he is out of my sight, yet I know he is still there. Waiting.

The air thickens, drawn tight like a thread. I lick at my lips, nervous. My gaze flickers to the now open doorway and then towards the roof above me and then back again. Temptation itches at me, flooding my body with adrenaline. The need to flee. This was it. This was my moment. I should go. I should try and run, to escape. I must. I had no idea of where I was or how to get out but I couldn't just sit here and do nothing. This was an opportunity, I couldn't waste it.

I listen carefully and hear nothing. There isn't even a single creak or whisper upon the air. Deadly silent. Without thinking further about it, I rush forward, practically shoving the gate open with enough force that it echoes loudly throughout the room. My pulse thunders in my ears. My leg screams in out in protest but I force the pain away, half-running half-limping as fast as I can towards the exit that would without a doubt lead me out towards freedom. I stagger a step, almost falling when my muscles knot in rebellion, urging me to stop.

To my delight, as I approach, the large double doors swing open with a beep. I stagger out into the bleak corridor beyond, blinking as the eerily bright lighting almost burns against my

retinas.

Heavy thudding footsteps echo, following after me. I whimper in despair as they gain steadily with each passing second. I continue to run and try to dart to one side, only for a wide hand to hook against the back of my knee and send me sprawling towards the floor. My palms slam down hard and pain shoots its way up my wrist and arms. I roll a little, barely having time to gather my senses when a huge male body folds itself over mine. The hunter's heat assaults me, far too close for comfort. I hear his purring clicks inches away from the side of my face. His breath is warm, causing goosebumps to dance across my nape.

He poises there for a heartbeat, pressing over me in what I can only describe as victory. I wait for the killing strike to come, only it doesn't. No sooner than the hunter is above me, suddenly he's gone, launching away to give me space to move again. Impatient, he begins to nudge at my hips, grunting low. I remain as still as a rabbit, attempting to play dead in the hope that he'd grow bored. He snarls suddenly and its enough to get me scrambling away from him.

I launch up again and start to run, or at least attempt to. No sooner than I had managed a few steps, he swipes at my leg again, taking me down to the ground again. Over and over we continue this strange, demented torture of his. Pushing and encouraging me to run, only to then take me down with ease, like a cat playing with a mouse… Breathing hard against the floor, I pause at that thought as realisation dawns.

He's playing with me. He has no intention of harming me, at least not yet. Why? I don't know, but I am all the more perplexed. What does he want from me, exactly? The hunter lunges over me again, hovering there in a sign of dominance before leaping away again. Light chattering sounds rumble from him and his jaw flares wide in a sneering grin. He seems to be finding this all immensely entertaining.

His arm sweeps out to nudge at me again and my saving grace comes in the form of an ear-splitting roar coming from somewhere down the corridor behind me. A huge, powerfully built figure suddenly slams into the smaller one, sending him flying a short distance away. It's the big one; the one who looks like he takes steroids as candy and bench presses trains as a past-time. Muscle upon muscle ripples with aggression and intent. He's built like a beast, bringing forth the image of Conan the Destroyer to mind. His attire is even more primitive too, consisting of a simple loincloth and netting across his massive chest and thighs. His broad shoulders roll, ready for a fight with the other male, who is now back on his feet. Claws flare, ready to render flesh. Their snarls and clicks communicate fast and furiously, their disagreement obvious. I have no idea of what they're saying.

Conan is just as terrifying. His face is exactly like the other, only more gnarled and scarred in places. His skin is slightly darker in shade, with a stronger scaly pattern across his doming head, which shakes like an agitated horse. His jaw splits to flash the fleshy insides of his shark-like teeth. His orange eyes blaze, sliding between the smaller male and then to me.

They lunge towards one another without warning, slamming into each other like two bulls. Conan picks up the other hunter and slams him down dangerously close to my legs. I shoot back and my eyes widen as I watch them pound into each other without mercy. It's both fascinating and horrifying, I can't bring myself to look away. One ducks as the other swipes

with razor-sharp claws. The sleeker one moves faster than the other, making strike after strike. The giant one grabs him again, practically throwing him down the corridor like he's nothing but a small stone.

I wince, only to then scuttle further back when the big one turns towards me with burning intent.

"No--!" I try to get up but am not fast enough. The floor escapes from beneath me as arms sweep me up and over a solid shoulder. The world whirls and blood rushes to my head at the swift, single motion. "Put me down! Please, put me down!"

My captor doesn't listen. *Conan* carries me as if I am nothing but a small babe. I gasp slightly with each step he takes as he lugs me back towards the room we'd just come from. The doors swing open as we step back inside. We're headed towards the cage - *my* cage – when suddenly something, or someone, sweeps into us from the side with all the force of a high-speed truck. The world spins again and I scream as I fall towards the floor. My teeth rattle as I land against it. More grappling sounds and I barely have time to lift my aching head something whistles through the air and slams into the flooring beside my arm. I look, paling at the deadly serrated blade inches away from my person…

Oh shit… Time to move.

I roll away and drag my frightened self towards the entrance of my cage. I crawl into its safety, closing the door behind me in the hope that it would keep the other two away and offer some sort of protection. My insides twist with unease as I watch the two continue to scrap it out with one another. There was no way in hell that I wanted to be out there with them. They were either going to accidentally stab me or trample me beneath their huge feet – and I wanted to avoid both options. Neither of them was showing any signs of surrendering or tiring. Both of them were like machines, wrecking everything within their path. I curl up tight and cover my ears against the sounds of their deafening roars.

A shadow moves to my left and I turn to find the third member of their trio stood there, silently watching the exchange with his huge arms crossed. I take in his matching crab-like features, noting the strange horn-like protrusions across his brows and cheeks. The ropey locks of his mane sway as he shakes his head, clearly displeased with the two. It's clear that he is their leader, yet refuses to get involved and stop them. His mandibles flare wide in a sneer when his attention falls towards me. The yellow pits of his eyes delve into me, cool and yet inflamed all at once.

He gives a brief hiss, before turning away from all of us and returning to the control screens behind him. Feeling somewhat deserted, I hug my knees tighter and pray to whatever god, deity or spirit that rules this horrible planet that I would survive to at least see another day after this one.

Chapter 7

Hours pass and it feels like an eternity. I've barely moved from my sanctuary in the corner of my cell. I remain ever vigilant, not even daring to close my eyes even for a second, despite how terribly exhausted I feel. The two giants have long since stopped their violent squabbling. Neither of them had opted to surrender to the other, but instead formed an em pass of sorts. A silent agreement had settled between them before they'd parted ways to focus upon other things. Luckily for me, they'd also decided to leave me alone as well. Every now and then the sleek black one would come over towards my cage and peer at me through the bars. His silent appraisal in unnerving, to say the least, and the inhuman shades of their eyes never fail to make a shiver roll down my back with unease.

This smaller one seems almost curious in the way he stares at me. As if I am some sort of anomaly that he's never seen before. As if *'I'* am the alien one and not him. He's always being touchy-feely too, finding any opportunity to try and reach through to pet at me with his clawed fingers. Which I have to say is creepy as hell...

The largest of three – I'm beginning to learn – seems the most volatile of them all. He's always prone to fits of anger, bellowing and roaring his anger whenever the opportunity arises. He's never hesitant about using his strength to put his point across and I only hoped he'd never find an excuse to use it against me. One sure hit from him would be an instant knock-out for me, I was sure of it.

The third, their apparent leader, was the calmest one amongst them, and also the most distant. He rarely speaks to the others, but when he does it's to demand focus or relay an order of some kind. His presence alone is enough to make any sane person want to shit their pants. His companions show him great respect, even stooping to kneel and salute to him when appropriate.

I watch them carefully throughout the day, noting every strange behaviour, every grunt and click. I have no idea of what they say to one another, but their body language is not unlike that of humans. They do the same to me in return. Often I would glance up only to find one, if not two of them looking in my direction, observing with a close intensity that makes my insides curl with unease. I have no idea what these giants want from me, but I do not dare to make another escape attempt just yet. It would be plain suicide. Despite that thought, not once have they approached to lock my cell door. It always remains open, even now, as if they're trying to tempt me into making a dash for it. If anything, it makes me crouch even further into my corner, determined not to fall for their traps again. I would wait, for now. My time would come. There had to be an opportunity at some point.

As more time passes, I notice the world beyond the mammoth-sized window growing darker with the approaching night. Hopefully, they would attempt to settle down to sleep soon (they did sleep, right?) and then I could relax a little bit. I was fed up of dozing off, only to then jerk awake with my heart racing in panic. I was forever on edge and anxious beyond words.

My legs were beginning to cramp from sitting in the same position for so long, but I was too afraid to move about too much in case one of them should turn their attention to me again.

In my mind I try to escape, thinking back towards home and all the cosy luxuries of life I had taken for granted before. A nice warm bath. Netflix. Chocolate. I sigh longingly, brushing my cheek wearily against the metal bars. God, I wish I was at home. What I wouldn't give for a MacDonald's burger with gherkins and fries right about now... My stomach growls loudly in complaint.

Something warm blasts against the side of my face and I crack of my eyes a little, only to then rear back at the hideous face hovering inches away from my own.

“Holy sh--!” I breathe hard, silently gratefully for the barrier between me and the hunter on the other side.

My eyes widen as I take him in. It's black-clad one again – the one I was beginning to refer to as *Ninja.* On quiet feet, he'd managed to sneak up on me, yet again. His lean frame squats easily as he looks at me with all the eerie stillness of a tombstone. Had I dozed off? How long had he been sat there without me knowing? I shiver just thinking about it. Perhaps he really was a ninja. Some kind of alien assassin waiting to make his killing strike and--

A scratching noise draws my attention downwards and I blink to find a long darkened claw tapping against the floor. There, sat right between us, is a bundle of small coloured berries. At least, they looked like berries anyway, despite their odd vibrant green colouring. My lips part a little surprise. I'm suddenly aware of how little I've eaten since being on this horrible planet. I was never one for eating fruit and veg but right now those tiny berries were looking like pure gold to my eyes. I was ready to eat anything. My belly groans again and I slowly glance up towards my captor who is waiting, watching me closely. His jaw splays slightly as he gestures down towards the food again. He nudges one with a claw and sends it rolling closer.

Despite the temptation to snatch for it, I hesitate. For all I knew he could be planning to poison me – it would be an easy, bloodless killing after all. I didn't trust him. Not one bit.

His low growl makes me freeze and I curl up into myself. Ignoring my hunger, I make my intentions clear and turn away, edging back towards the opposite side of the cage. I wouldn't touch it, not even if my life depended on--

The scraping sound of the door opening has me whirling around in panic. The hunter steps inside and I shrink back against the bars as his huge, frightening shape all but hoovers up the tiny space within.

Oh sh--

“No!” I yelp as he reaches for me.

I try to dart past him but he's too fast, snatching me up by the back of my nape like a naughty puppy. His body swallows mine as he leans over me, crowding my space. He smells musky and earthy, of something wild, like a beast. I receive no warning before he all but presses me down towards the floor, pinning me under his powerful thighs. Although he keeps most of his

weight from crushing mine, he's still huge and incredibly strong. Inhumanly so. His hot skin is thickened like a snakes as it rubs against mine. His unyielding fingers find my jaw and all I can do is stare at the sharp dark claws hovering inches away from my eyeball. One foul move and I'd surely get blinded by them.

My mouth parts, more in shock than in anything else. A second later something is pressed between them, something round and small. I try to fight him as best I can, wriggling and squirming to avoid his hold. He grunts something - a command if ever I'd heard one – and presses the tiny bead further into my mouth.

I gasp for a moment and my teeth crunch down on it. Sharp, tangy juice bursts across my tongue, almost too tart to bear. My face scrunches up. It's then that I realise what he's doing. He's trying to force-feed me one of the berries.

And Jesus Christ above, they are disgusting. My gag reflex surges and I try to swallow the bile rising into my throat.

I lean away, choking. “All right, I get the point! Get offmph--!” Another one is shoved into my mouth, and then another.

I literally feel like I'm about to be sick. Before I know it, my entire cheeks are stuffed like a god damned hamsters with these tiny acidic fruits that taste like they could disintegrate plastic. I chew on them faster, swallowing them back in a haste to get rid of them.

The hunter gives a low trilling purr before finally releasing me and moving back a little. I jump away, panting hard. My entire body is shaking, I can't stop it. I feel so helpless and weak and it's frustrating me beyond imagining. Every emotion I know comes surging forward, one after the other. First fury, for the way he'd manhandled me. Second, disgust. And then a sense of deep soul-aching sadness. I hug my arms to me as my stress levels soar higher with each breath.

I want to go home... Right now. I want to leave! I didn't want to cope with this any more. Hell, I would have even taken Jason as an option. Anywhere, as long as it meant somewhere safe. I wanted to see another human being. I wanted to talk to someone. Anyone! The desolation of my current predicament was slowly creeping in on me, threatening to drown me in its depths.

A lone tear drops down my cheek, and then another.

The hunter – Ninja – nudges at me, prodding at my sore thigh. I lash out with a kick, almost dislocating my knee in the process.

“Will you just fuck off!” I bellow at him. I secretly hope that he can't understand what I'm saying, otherwise I'm done for. If he does, he doesn’t show any sign of it. In fact, he seems to completely ignore my outburst, which in itself makes me feel even more miserable.

I wince and draw my aching leg back to me, rubbing at the calf gently. Usually, back at home, I’d have had my cane and regular pain medication to take for moments like these. But I had nothing. No comforts. No relief.

I sniffle and begin to massage my upper thigh, oblivious to the hunter's attention on me until I see the length of his arm reaching towards me from the corner of my vision.

I jerk back, glaring at him. "You just don't take a hint, do you?" I utter under my breath, turning my face away from his prying, creepy eyes. "It's like trying to talk to a brick wall, only I'd get more—hey!"

Out of nowhere, fingers latch onto my hip. I'm pulled across the short space and into a set of strong arms. I wriggle in panic, taken by surprise by his abrupt closeness and the heat of his body against mine. Without grace or gentleness, Ninja rises up, lugging my weight over his shoulder with ease.

Ugh…. *Great.* Not this again.

I simply hang there, far too tired to fight him. With bouncing steps, he carries me out and into the corridor, and then into another room. This one is new and unfamiliar to me. The space is somewhat empty and dimly lit. The only obvious thing in sight is the large circular shallow pit at the centre of the area. I'm righted to my feet and I stagger a little, staring at the padded flooring there and the huge leaves lining the base of it. In the gloom, two pairs of glowing eyes gleam back at me, frightening and sharp as jungle cats on the hunt. Two massive figures are lounged back within the pit, watching us with quiet predatory stillness. And then it clicks…

It's a bed… Correction - It's *their* bed.

I try to step back but a broad chest is blocking my escape. I barely get a chance to blink when I'm suddenly swept up again and carried towards the pit and the hunter's waiting within.

"Oh god… no," I plead quietly, hoping that by some miracle some sort of deity would hear and save me from this unfolding horror. What were they going to do to me? My mind was racing at every terrifying possibility.

I'm plonked on my butt right in the middle of the leaves, surrounded by three heavy male bodies. Every inch of me freezes. Like a deer caught in headlights, I dare not breathe let alone move. If I'd thought these guys were big before, nothing could compare to this very moment. I'm pressed back, forced to lay amongst the crisp, yet warm foliage. Two of them crowd around me, closing me in between their hardened frames. One is against my left side, another to my right. I literally lay there like a dead thing as a plate-sized hands settle against my belly, dangerously low. Someone's head is pressing the top of my hair as a hot breath blasts against my neck. A low purring trill sounds, vibrating through every bone in my body and my bottom lip begins to tremble…

Whatever happened from this point on was beyond my control. I could do nothing against them. My only thought was that if I tried not to fight too much against them perhaps they would offer mercy and I would survive whatever they had planned.

"Please…"

My tear-filled eyes slide away and find the third member of their trio reclining a short distance away. Though their silent leader had not moved closer as the others did, I could still feel his gaze like a brand against my skin. His ominous presence is just as suffocating.

I swallow thickly and try to calm my racing heartbeat. Another calloused hand slides against the length of my ribs, sliding under the netting of my weird makeshift top. It hovers just below the curve of my breast, sitting there comfortably without progressing any higher. A thigh rubs against mine. A smooth chest moves with a breath. In the dimness, I feel something nip at my shoulder and I shiver again.

Let this be over quickly.

Their conjoined trilling drops in tone before disappearing entirely into silence. For what seems like forever, I stay there, as still as stone. Both males have relaxed against me and a strange rasping sound is coming from the one to my right. He's… *Snoring?*

What the… I inhale a deep breath of relief, blinking into the darkness. They're asleep? I can't believe this is actually happening.

I slump back between them, defeated and exhausted. Despite how tired I feel, I dare not close my eyes and sleep. Only a mad person would allow themselves to become vulnerable in a situation like this. I couldn't let it happen. I mustn't. Yet even as I thought it, the heat of their bodies was wrapping around me, sucking me into a wave of drowsiness.

I can't fight it any more. Just as my eyelids start to unwillingly close again, I catch a glimpse of yellow glowing ones from across the space. The third hunter is still there, quietly watching us from afar. Ever observant. Guarding.

Please , my mind silently pleads to him as I slowly succumb to the darkness... *Don't hurt me.*

And then I'm gone.

Sin'Chila POV

They rest. Throughout the night he watches them, ever vigilant. The female is nestled between his brothers like a youngling, her small shape swallowed by those of his kin. Their differences are stark and obvious to his eyes and already Sin'Chila was beginning to doubt his decision in allowing them to keep her. She was such a tiny thing. So easily harmed and fragile, not like that of his own kind. His brother's coveted her greedily, always playing and fawning over her like a greatly valued trophy. The sight of it was both amusing and

disturbing to behold to him. They were, after all, warriors, with the purest of blood running through their veins. They had no time or need for such things, such *softness*. And yet...

Sin'Chila reaches out and idly touches the tip of one of the hooman's naked toes. They are blunt and clawless, the skin stark pale in contrast to the darkness of his own flesh. The delicate creature shifts, drawing his gaze to the sleek lengths of her limbs and the sloping curves of her teats. Memories surge. Ones of her knelt before him, pleading and whining to be mounted, even as his claws had slipped into the moistened heat of her *snat.*

A low growl grinds within his throat. Even now he could remember the musky sweetness of her scent. It had been subtle, yet it had almost driven him to a place of madness. He'd wanted nothing more than to rut into her welcoming body and give her what she'd craved. To take her. His body hardens, considering the possibility.

Calm yourself , his inner voice speaks firmly, forever guiding his reasoning. The others looked to him for leadership, to remain untouched by such weaknesses. Whilst the female remained with them, he would keep his distance and allow his brothers to satisfy their curiosity with her. In time, he was sure, they would grow tired of her and she would no longer be a distraction to them.

Decided, Sin'Chila settles back against his nest with a grunt, eyeing the hooman once again. His acute sight misses nothing, observing her every breath and movement. She mewls a small cry in her sleep and his insides tighten with some unknown voiceless need. Without realising, a deep purr rumbles from him and the curve of one knuckle draws lightly against the skin of her alien-smooth skin. She stills, quietening again. With a huff, Sin'Chila draws away, turning away from the three of them to allow himself to fully rest as well.

Chapter 8

Sin'Chila POV

With a grunt, Sin'Chila watches the spectacle occurring before him. The intimidating shape of his blood brother, Yaknaur, towers over the tiny figure on the ground. The little female is curled up into herself, as still like stone, trying to hide from his advances. At one opportunity, she manages to scramble underneath one of the control panels. Her eyes are wide circles in her pale and alien visage. Her fear – he breathes it in again – is a sweet tangy lure upon the air. The scent of prey.

Since the moment of their awakening, Yaknaur had become greedy in his torment of her. The hooman had no chance of getting away from him, no matter where she chose to hide. Even now, Yaknaur sneered at her, reaching under the station to try and drag her out from her newfound sanctuary. She kicks and swats at him like a desperate *felina* trying to defend her young. Brave, yet a foolish feat to attempt against a full-bloodied hunter.

Sin'Chila inhales again, watching them closely. It was not for him to interfere in such matters. Yet even now he could recognise the calling of the rut ebbing from Yaknaur's flesh. The heat would be upon him soon, far too sooner than expected. If he did not learn to control himself, he would surely maim his sport, perhaps even kill her with his roughness. Hoomans, after all, were such weak beings, despite all the noise and chaos they liked to make.

The hooman gives a high shriek as she's pulled out from her corner and Sin'Chila turns to them further with solemnity.

"Come, little female, there is no point in hiding," his brother hisses with a chuckle. "Let me look at you."

The hooman's mewl of distress only seems to excite him more. Without warning, Yaknaur bends over her, pinning her to the ground in a sure sign of dominance. Of that of a male intending to claim a female. The bulge of his *ih'cros* is obvious and thick from behind his coverings. The female eyes it, her skin paling even further. She does not accept him. Nor does she rise to the challenge of fighting him away. Even if she had, she is too small to keep him at bay.

Torn, Sin'Chila grunts at them, contemplating. Some part of him thrills at the sight of her weakness. The hunter in him enjoyed seeing such vulnerability, such helplessness. Her slender limbs and soft looking flesh send shards of heat surging through his gut. And at the same time an impulsive need to defend her from his kin's advances.

"Easy, brother," he says coolly, eyeing them further with a swift rattle of his jaw. "Do not be so hasty, you'll break her."

Yaknaur stiffens and Sin'chila waits, ready for the confrontation to come. Before any of them can register what is happening, a small body is suddenly rushing towards him. Amused, Sin'Chila dips his large head, trilling at the sight of the tiny hooman now trying to burrow herself behind his back, seeking his protection. She utters something, a plea of some sort. He'd recognise such a pitiful sound anywhere. She doesn't quite make contact with his body, but he feels her heat all the same and it is… *pleasing.*

Yaknaur rises to face them both. His scowl tells all of his fury at being hindered from his task. His claws stretch in a growing sign of aggression. Sin'Chila tilts his head slowly in a silent question. Would his brother go against him for the hooman? His own flesh and blood?

"Enough, Yaknaur. She has had enough. Let her rest."

Yaknaur growls, shoulders broadening as he stands to his full height. "But it is my time with the female. Memnis said—"

"I care not for what Memnis has said," Sin'Chila cuts in with a sure measure of calmness. "You are not yourself." He trills the words carefully, making his meaning clear. "If it is a quick rut that you seek then go to the Vilka Varsa unit."

"I have already spilt my seed there twice this day. It is not enough. I want the hooman."

"No."

"You would deny me my--?"

"Heed my command, Yaknaur. Do not make me tell you again."

Yaknaur roars once, splaying his arms wide as he bellows out his frustration. "You say this only because you wish to claim her for yourself. Admit it!"

Ignoring his jibe, Sin'Chila crosses his arms over his powerful chest. Unmoving.

"She is *mine,"* Yaknaur hisses.

He flashes his mandibles wide even as his sharp gaze keeps sliding to hooman. His shoulders ripple, the width of his chest expands in an obvious sign of displaying for a female. He's trying to lure her out but she doesn't move a single step. Instead, the small lengths of her digits brush against Sin'Chila's side and a low purr unintentionally rumbles out from his throat. She gasps and as swiftly as it's there the contact is broken as she pulls away.

"She is *mine* , as well." The declaration flies out unbidden and not without a hint of threat.

Something within him shifts as every inch of his skin blazes like a flame. Never before had he stood against his own blood. Until now. But if his brother intended to challenge him for the female, then so be it. He would accept. For reasons unbeknownst to him, he would not allow her to be harmed. Nor would he allow Yaknaur to lose himself so easily to his urges. Such things were weaknesses. Nothing more.

Yaknaur steps forth as though to declare more, only to then pause. His stature slumps, growing defeated.

Sensing the change, Sin'Chila nods in approval. "Return to the unit and then begin your patrol." He gives him a pointed look. "Do not return until your temper has cooled."

Begrudgingly, Yaknaur bends, sweeping his arm to his chest in salutation and respect. He says nothing but grumbles quietly as he spins away to leave. The doorway slides open just in time as Memnis enters his way onto the deck. No words are shared, but Sin'chila does not miss the slight shove their sulky sibling gives to the other in passing. Memnis snaps at him with a hiss, glaring at him before turning to face his leader. Realization swiftly dawns, as both he and Sin'Chila turn to stare down towards the shivery hooman beside them

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It's official. I am literally in hell. If I had thought otherwise before, then clearly I hadn't considered the possibility of *this* . I don't know how much more of this I can take, but I'm nearly at breaking point. All I can do is stand there, trembling like a leaf next to the massive hunter who had somewhat – and probably unwillingly – just saved me from Conan's brutish claws. What was his god damn problem today anyway? Only last night they'd dragged me into sleeping with them and today he just would not leave me alone. If his raging boner had been anything to go by, it was clear he was in need of a lay, and I was not going to be an option in that department. I was only thankful that 'Zeus' – the leader of their group – had been around to keep him in check.

It was clear they'd argued about me. The way Conan had stared at me, like I was a slab of delicious meat, had made my insides curl uneasily. Croydon hadn't mentioned about them being cannibals at all. And they weren't, right? I sincerely hoped not. Desperation had called and I'd rushed to hide behind Zeus in a bid that he would help. And low and behold, he had. Which surprised me. Like a lot.

I glance to find two scary-looking hunters watching me. What did they even want from me? I still didn't know. I was of no use to them. They hadn't killed me, yet, which was a bonus. Kinda.

Deep breaths, Lottie, I chant to myself. *Everything is going to be fine. You'll get through this. Don't panic.*

I shuffle on my feet, looking from one male to the other. Their silence is deafening, almost calculating in its intensity. I felt like a rabbit amongst a pack of hungry wolves, waiting to be snapped at and devoured. I sidestep away from Zeus, realising belatedly just how close I was standing next to him; I was almost pressed against his side. He's so ridiculously tall that my head only just reaches his midriff. I have to crane my head back to look at him. My bad leg twinges, inflamed again, wobbling beneath me as I tried to keep myself upright. Earlier on I had stumbled, reaching out a hand for stability, only to have made contact with Zeus' rock-hard back. And I don't know who had been more surprised and disgusted by it – him or me.

When he'd hissed I'd almost shit myself thinking he lop off my head for daring to touch his person.

The larger one jerks his head then, uttering something to the smaller. I wait there, slowly trying to calm my uneven breathing as their entire focus roams over me from head to toe. They're planning something, I can sense it. I back up another pace, needing distance and their stares follow my every movement.

Whatever they're saying seems to be with complete calmness and serious consideration, not at all like the heated debate from when Conan had been here. I wrap my arms around my middle, needing comfort. I eye the nearby doorway before sliding my gaze around the room, seeking out potential hiding places. Watching them like this only makes me feel even more alone in my situation. More isolated.

I don't want to be here , I think to myself with growing sadness. I want to be back home, with my friends and family. I want my boring existence of a life back. At least that made sense to me. At least, there, I was safe.

Here, I had no one. I was by myself with these beings, these hunters, who enjoyed killing things and thrived on chaos. I did not belong here. And yet… The more I considered it, the more I began to think I didn't really belong anywhere.

She cannot be here…

She's a liability…

I won't risk this mission, not for you or anyone…

You're not welcome here…

Even now I could still hear Croydon's words echoing in my mind. Even if I did manage to get away and escape these creatures, there was no guarantee that I would survive the wilderness that waited for me outside of this ship. There might not even be a chance of me ever returning home. And that thought, on its own, was enough to make my vision swim with tears.

Zeus gestures to me with darkened claws and I flinch. Their clicks are strange and inhuman, and their waggling jaws are equally as freakish. Ninja's tone, I realize, is a little less deep than Zeus'. He sounds more like a chirping angry bird. Although he's shorter by a heads length to the male beside him, he's still much taller than me by miles. I feel no sense of security or safety with either of them.

I'm too busy staring towards the large window – which is giving me a wonderful view of swaying trees and a hazy red-gold sky – to notice one of them approaching. I gasp, whipping around when the air shifts to my left and a strong hand latches itself around my upper arm. I struggle to jerk away, but Zeus simply holds me tighter, grunting something sharply in what I can only describe as a command.

Ninja draws nearer then, pulling something out from the belt at his waist. The strange L-shaped device is lifted towards my face and that's when all hell breaks loose.

"No! Don't!"

I fight in earnest then, wriggling and striking out at anything I can reach. Arms capture me up against a muscular body from behind and I attempt to lift my legs, hoping my deadened weight would cause my attacker to drop me to the floor. He doesn't. Instead, he holds me tighter, carrying my whole being with ease as if I'm made of nothing more than cotton wool. We somehow make it to the ground and I'm pressed between two solid thighs, held still as the black one creeps forward again.

"No-mph!" A hand snares around my face and jerks it impatiently to the side. I feel like I'm being constricted by a snake.

The device touches behind my ear. A loud buzz sounds, followed by an intensely sharp pain against the skin there. I cry out, unable to do little else. Zeus rumbles a noise. His head lowers, sifting through the crown of my hair with his awful mouth. None of it is calming me down. Not at all.

As swiftly as the pain is there, it's suddenly gone. Anther beep echoes, followed by a monotone voice speaking from directly in my left ear.

"Translation process complete. Initiation successful."

What the…

I lift a hand to the side of my head, perplexed. Everything, including myself, has drawn to stillness. My fingers brush against something small and nodule like, cool like steel imbedded against my flesh. Ninja leans away and I become aware of the fact that I'm half-sprawled in Zeus's lap. His hold loosens as I take a cleansing breath.

"Memnis."

I startle, snapping my head up towards Ninja who is watching me carefully. He taps to his chest, speaking again.

"Memnis."

I frown at him. I can see his jaws moving, only this time I can hear a second voice speaking to me as well, like observing a very badly subtitled foreign movie.

"What did you do to me?" I ask shakily, as all my adrenaline burns away into liquid exhaustion.

"We… speak."

It takes a while for the words to be converted, but I soon begin to realise what the device is meant for. It's a translator of some kind.

Ninja points to himself again, crouching down to my level as though to try and appear less threatening. “Memnis.”

It dawns then. Was that his name? *Mem-nishk* ? How odd. It was certainly a long shot away from ‘Ninja’ anyway.

Nin—I mean Memnis gestures to the hunter behind me. “Sin’Chila.”

I rotate slightly, only daring a quick glimpse at the Yautja’s burning eyes before turning away again.

“ *Seen-Sheela?”* I try to pronounce it as he did, only to fail miserably. I almost want to laugh at myself. Zeus grunts and I feel, rather than see, him nod.

“First hunter…” The translator learns quickly but not quickly enough. It misses a few phrases, focussing on certain ones, making their meaning not quite so clear. “… Proud leader…”

Ah, I see. I take it all in slowly. So, Zeus was their leader, after all. I sit there awkwardly, uncertain of what to say.

"Yaknaur.″ He motions towards the door that big-tall-and-scary had just left through. *Yak-naaw*. So that was the big ones name? Right. Ok, then.

Sensing a me-Tarzan-you-jane moment coming on, I wave to myself. “Lottie.” It’s the weirdest thing I’ve ever done in my life. I swallow thickly before changing my tone to a softer, more pleading one. “Me… go home?”

I attempt to stand, but the one I now knew as Sin’Chila holds me fast. Ok, maybe not then. His thighs are like steel beneath me. I feel like a small child sitting on them, so tiny in comparison to his massive size.

“You…” His clicks flow to me, breezing against the length of my neck. At one point the side of his mouth brushes there and I fight the urge to flinch. “…Here now.” His words are absolute, unforgiving in their command.

“Belong to warriors.” Memnis pipes in with a solid thump to his breast, as though declaring something that brought him great pride.

I shake my head, more for my own benefit than theirs. I blink hard, swallowing back the thickness in my throat. I didn’t want to stay here with them. I didn’t want to be anywhere near them. I wanted to go home! Yet I knew that no matter what I said they would not relent on the matter. There would be no compromise. I was stuck here, at least for now.

I clench my fists tight against my knees as they begin to discuss something. I try to keep up with their conversation, relying entirely on the translator to do the work. I only manage to capture certain words here and there, all without clarity or context of their meaning. Something about *repairs* and… a ‘ *restoration unit’* ? Hmm, ok then.

“Take her.”

Hands push me up and towards Memnis, who takes a hold my arm.

“Wait,” I stutter, uncertain of what is going on. Memnis is pulling me behind him, practically dragging me towards the doorway with each unwilling step. I look back towards Sin’Chila who is following behind us, as silent as a shadow. Ominous. “What is going on? Please…” I try to yank myself free but to no avail. “Where are you taking me?”

We head down the corridor, our combined thudding footsteps sounding like the tolling of a bell. Deadly and oppressive. We slide into another room that I’ve never seen before. Though it is small and narrow, individual tube containers line each side of it like columns.

“What—” I start to speak again, but find myself none-too-gently being pushed inside one of them. The door closes, sealing me in the tiny but transparent space within. Panic surges. If I didn’t have claustrophobia before, I do now. I can barely lift my arms to bang against the glass, shouting to be freed. My heart pounds in growing dread. Anxiety chokes me like a hangman’s noose. What are they going to do to me?

“Let me out!” I pound against the barrier, pleading to both of them on the other side. One stands there idly observing. The other – Memnis – I can vaguely see is pressing some buttons on a nearby control panel.

Oh god… what are they planning to do?

From beneath me, an eerie mist rises, clogging and cloying against my nostrils with a heavy, chemical smell. It starts to float up around me, slowly shrouding my vision as pure blind terror grips me like a fist.

Oh shit, I’m going to die. They’re going to kill me. But Why? What had I done? Had they kept me around all this time, just to end it like this? Surely not. Please say not.

Tears burn, scalding down my face as I begin to lose myself to pure hysterics. I want to get out!

My vision swims, I can feel my body growing limp and sluggish. I’m finding it difficult to draw breath. I slump forward, slamming against the pane, pressing my palm there in a desperate bid for freedom. I vaguely make out Sin’Chila drawing close, his eyes bright and oddly beautiful in the manic chaos of the moment.

“Please…” I try again, pleading to him even as my voice fades into nothing but a croak.

“Easy female…” I hear his voice through the dimness. “We shall… fix you.”

Fix? I blink heavily at that. What did he mean? Fix what exactly? There was nothing to fix.

Before I can think of anything else, the room sways and I succumb to the deep blackness.

Chapter 9

Yaknaur POV

The length of his *Ih cros* forces its way through the barrier of the Vilka Varsa unit like a blade slipping through flesh. The snugly fitted contraption tightens around him, squeezing him with warmth as the fullness of his sacks slaps with each powerful thrust. Claws grip the station, holding it firmly in a need to drive in even further, needing to be deeper. Panting, a snarl rips from his throat.

From across the space, the holographic figures hovering before him shift and change. At his bidding, they take the shape of two hoomans – a male and a female. They lay face to face. The male hovers above his mate, his *cros* diving into the females swollen pink sex. Her whimpers echo as she grasps at him, seeking more of his taking.

Yaknaur observes them closely, taking in everything. Every action. Every behaviour. Fingers brush against a face. Their strange mouths join together, mating as well with a flash of their blunted tongues. The male fondles his mate attentively, teasing her little peaks and toying between her parted thighs with a strange gentleness.

I love you… He hears it often between the pair as they openly express their loyalty to one another. How pitiful. He sneers, ignoring their soft chattering, focussing only on the details of their breeding. There is something appealing about it. When Yautja mate their joining is brutal, sometimes violent, resulting in blood spilt from both parties. Hoomans, however, seemed to be softer in their driven lusts. Nurturing, almost.

A mixture between disgust and curiosity rolls through him and he barks a command, causing the images to swirl and change again. The hologram flickers into that of a single, fire-maned hooman female. Her small body bends for him, giving him a full view of all of her female treasures. The swollen folds of her sex glisten with a pinken hue that he was swiftly beginning to learn as a sign of arousal. Her eyes look back at him over a slender shoulder, pleading with him even as she cries out in her need to be taken… To be taken by *him.*

Yes. The thought sends a shard of heat through his groin. The globes of his sacks draw up tighter and his thrusts become wilder. His end is approaching swiftly upon the wind, fast and furious as his raging heartbeat. He wants her. He wants the little hooman wrapped around him, accepting him into her body. Her womb, he knew, would milk him strongly and welcoming his seed.

Soon. Soon he wouldn't have a need for this poor imitation of the thing he truly craved. Soon he would take her and—

A whispered sound reaches his hearing. A hush upon the air. A slight gasp. Then, as if recognising the very presence of his own blood, he could sense *her* there. Something in him roared, seeking to be free. A calling.

The hooman. She was behind him, he could smell her. She was watching him…

I awaken and the first thing I can see is burning light from above my head. I'm laid across a metal table of some kind and I blink as memories come flying back to me. Ugh. What had they done to me now? I lift an arm, testing the strength in it as if expecting something to be wounded or different. I'm still fully dressed in my tunic and untouched. Nothing is holding me down against the counter and it seems as though I am alone in whatever room I am in. The glass pill-shaped tubes are nowhere to be seen, yet I could clearly remember the sheer terror I'd felt at being locked within one of them.

I sigh, both in relief and uncertainty. They'd put me into a god damn cylinder full of gas. Which leads me to wonder and worry about what else they had done to me.

We shall fix you…

Those words come rushing back to me and I can't hold back the snake of dread that curls within my belly. Breathing deep, I sit up and carefully rise to my feet, sliding down from the table. I lift a hand to my face, needing some sort of reassurance that everything is all right. I then pat at my chest and find nothing out of place there either. There is no pain. No pain at all. Not even in my crippled leg.

I pause at that and look down towards it. Something doesn't seem right. I slowly lift the netting over my bare thighs and stare at my limbs below. The skin there is smooth and without a single blemish in sight. There is no twisted skin or bunching muscle. Nothing. I blink again, surely thinking that my eyes are deceiving me.

We shall fix you…

Dawning realisation hits me hard as I run a hand down my legs, prodding and feeling gently for any tenderness. I walk forward a few steps, expecting the sharp nagging ache to be there, only there isn't any. I gasp in disbelief, my eyes widening. I walk some more around the counter without so much as a single hobble or misstep. The motion is smooth. Perfect.

They had… healed me? I couldn't believe it. Surely I was dreaming. Why on earth would they do such a thing? I stare around at the clinical steel walls, perplexed. After so many years of struggling, of taking medications and completing useless therapies, I was finally like everyone else. How they had even managed such a miracle is beyond me.

I bend over and carefully touch my toes, just for the fun of it. I then lift my knee to my chest and hold there for a second, balancing on one foot. Jesus Christ, I honestly didn't know what to say or do. I wanted to run, to leap, to dance, to make up for all the times I'd been unable to do so.

I rush towards the exit and it slides open as I approach. Even though I'm uneasy, there is a huge grin plastered across my face. I head left. Everything looks to the same to me and I don't recognise anything distinct enough to give me any clues as to where to go.

I keep glancing down, watching my legs moving. So many emotions are sailing through me all at once. Joy. Worry. Complete and utter gratefulness.

I approach one door and it opens. I pop my head in, only to find a storage room of some sorts filled with various crates and cages. I withdraw and step into another; another control room with lots of switches and cables. I move to the next one, and then the next. I have no idea of whom or what I'm looking for, but I know that I want answers. How had they done this? Why had they done this? None of it was making any sense.

On bare feet, I pad into the next room, hearing motion from within. Someone is inside. The metal doors slide wide and I stride in, only to draw to an abrupt halt. There, nought but a feet meters away from my position, is a figure. Yaknaur. He has his back to me but I can clearly see what he's doing and…

"Holy shit." I gasp, unable to do little else.

His huge powerful body is curved over what looks like a machine of some kind. Its height reaches to his midriff as he braces before it. Around its perimeter are individual control pads, at least four of them by my count. A circular but flat surface sits at the centre between them all, flashing a large faded image there. The sight of it by itself is enough to make me pause. But it's what Yaknaur is doing to it that really makes me freeze with shock. He's… Fucking it.

Unable to help it, I peer closer. The pads aren't controls at all, they're strange narrow tunnels of what looks like a gel-like material. Yaknaur's hips piston in fast, thrusting his cock into its depths as if his very life is depending on it. Deep, guttural groans are growling out from his being, more beast than anything I've ever heard before. His muscles are bulging with his efforts and covered is gleaming sweat. I can't see his face, but his head is tilted back as a long hiss slides out from his fleshy mouth.

I swallow thickly, staring as he rides the machine harder. It creaks and groans under his vicious attack. Yellow beads of creamy moisture have escaped and seeped down his thighs and to the floor at his feet. He draws back and I get a clearer view of his curved penis. The bulbous head is purple in shade and the shaft is encased with iridescent veins that seem to glow and ebb.

I swallow again, my mouth dry. I back up a step and it is then that I hear it. High pitched feminine moans are coming from the image in the middle of the machine and when I finally take notice of it, my entire body is dipped into a burning pool of heat. A very human and very familiar figure is bent over on all fours, spreading her ass wide with her hands to show the clenching flesh of her pussy. As the projection moans, Yaknaur increases his pace to an almost brutal pounding. The slapping of his balls is heavy upon the air, making something within me tighten. My thighs rub together as an ache begins to form there.

I recognise the woman. I know her face as well as I know my own. Because… well… it was *me.* I don't know how or why, but somehow he'd managed to place my own visage in the display and he was… *masturbating* to it.

Oh god…

I gasp again and shake my head. I shouldn't be here, I shouldn't be watching this. Yet for some reason, I cannot seem to look away. As if hearing my very thoughts, Yaknaur breaks his pace. Slowly, his inhuman face rotates towards me and I meet the glittering brightness of his hungry eyes. His mouth shudders wide, almost aggressive.

I shiver, completely trapped by his gaze alone. He angles himself and allows me a full view of what he's doing. He's not in the least embarrassed or intending to stop. Good lord, his dick was huge. Its girth alone looked as wide as my forearm, perhaps thicker.

I retreat some more, only to land into something warm and solid. A breath dances across my hair. I jerk in surprise and try to spin around to face the hunter behind me. Before I can manage it, a set of arms capture me and draw me against a solid chest.

"Found you," Memnis speaks from by my ear. His head lowers to press close to my neck.

I barely catch his phrasing before he begins chattering away to the other hunter. I stand there as still as stone, not daring to move. Memnis' heat is like a furnace against my back. The skin of his muscular arms is leathery and rough.

With little else to so, I simply watch and wait for what is to come next.

Memnis POV

"Must you be such a beast, brother," Memnis drawls, teasing his older sibling in his time of need. "You are greedy to keep her to yourself."

Not breaking his stride, Yaknaur tosses a curse at him. The heavy scent of his sweat permeates the air, filling it with the pungency of his pheromones. He was rutting hard into the Varsa Unit, wild and untamed as any beast he'd seen. If the dangerous glaze of his orbits were anything to go by, he was well and truly lost in his heat, barely grasping onto a single thread of control.

"Let her watch me," Yaknaur trills, stretching his body wider in invitation to the small female held within Memnis' grasp. "I can smell her arousal…"

Memnis inhales. Mingled amongst the strength of Yaknaur's musk was the light scent of the hooman. Sweet and faint, yet entirely unmissable.

“We should return,” Memnis replies as she gives a small shudder against him. Her warmth is pleasing, that much he is certain of. Contemplating the idea of releasing her made something deep within him churn. “Our brother will not be pleased if we—”

“Your need is as great as mine,” Yaknaur grunts. He shakes his head in refusal and the locks of his mane sway with the harsh movement. “What harm would it be to play with her? Come. Bring her closer… Let me mark her.”

His chest expands. The bleak shades of his skin darken even further; a sign of his mating frenzy. His brother was close and ready to spill his seed. With a soft series of clicks, Memnis hesitates, glancing down at the female. Uncertain.

His own body is responding to her as well and the thought of watching Yaknaur staking his claim makes his *ih cros* twitch with interest. Such things could never be so, Sin Chila had said as much. Yet despite that, his feet were already moving forward and drawing the hooman along with him…

I’m being pushed from behind, edged closer towards Yaknaur’s powerful frame. I dig my heels in but it’s of no use. Memnis is too strong. My sight keeps dropping low to Yaknaur’s groin in horrified awe. He notices my focus and juts his hips out in a blatant male display. He wants me to look at him, I realise. A grin stretches across his ghastly mouth as we near. His thrusts grow slow. One moment gliding out to the very edge of the swollen tip, only to then plunge forward straight to the base again.

It’s an awful sight to behold. So starkly primitive. So wrong. What’s even more disturbing is the ghostly ache that’s beginning to bloom deep within the pit of my belly. Some horrible part of me is finding this entire thing exciting. Erotic.

What the hell is wrong with me?

My legs feel like jelly as I’m drawn to a stop. Yaknaur barks an order and I’m suddenly pushed down to kneel between two solid thighs. Memnis crowds against my back and holds me still. His low purring sounds are almost soothing. Encouraging.

“Do not fear us, female.” My arms are freed as his arms snake around my middle. “He shall not harm you. Give him what he seeks.”

What he seeks? I tremble at that. What were they planning to do? Did I even want to know?

With a wet sound, Yaknaur pulls out from the station and moves to stand over us. He's like a mountain, casting a hulking shadow over us both. My neck cranes back trying to look at him.

His foot brushes against my knee and suddenly his large erect cock is hovering inches away from my face.

Erm…

More moisture beads from the end, splattering down to paint against the skin of my thighs. His claws wrap around the shaft and he begins stroking its length, fast and hard. Eager for release. I realise too late what is about to happen, I don't have time to react. It barely takes a moment before he snaps forward and with a guttural roar sends a spray of bright cum all over my chest and chin. I yelp and try to lean back. His cock twitches. The fullness of his balls are moving as he empties himself over me.

I gawk at him, stunned. I'm not sure whether to feel disgusted or aroused by it all. My emotions are all over the place.

"Ok then..." I stutter for something to say. I scrunch a little, raising my arms as wetness slips under my tunic and across my belly. "I...er..."

Memnis purrs, even as some of it lands across the side of his shoulder as well. He's nuzzling into me, trilling constantly.

"I have marked you well," Yaknaur says, brushing my chin with a gnarled knuckle. "I am pleased."

His cock grows flaccid under my watch and he tucks it away. Memnis growls in complaint as Yaknaur pulls me from him suddenly, directly into his arms. The floor leaves my feet and I squirm at the sudden shift of position.

"What are you--" My question dies as his broad mandibles brush into the locks of my hair.

Like a babe, he carries me close to him. He strides out of the door and down the corridor without any hesitation. With my arms wrapped around his neck for stability, I look back towards Memnis who is following steadily behind us.

"Hang on. Where are we going?" I ask, unable to keep up with their sudden shift of mood and behaviours. If they were planning on doing some more freaky experiments than it was huge 'no thank you' from me.

Yaknaur merely grunts and does not answer.

Confused, I peer back at Memnis and the furrow of his brow softens as our eyes meet. He trills before reaching over Yaknaur's shoulder to tug at a strand of my hair. "You must be clean... We must bathe you."

Um...what?

Chapter 10

They have a pool . For a long moment, I stare down into it with delighted surprise. *Finally* . After days of struggling across this horrible planet and being stuck on this ship, I finally recognised something that resembled a luxury from home. It looks exactly like a swimming pool – kinda. As I'm placed within its waters I gasp at its temperature. It's neither hot nor cold, yet both. Incredibly strange. The water swirls around my naked legs, crystalline clear and yet glowing with some sort of inner light. Like magic. It barely comes to my thighs, yet its enough to entice a groan from my lips.

Blind to the hunters either side of me, I scoop up a handful and splash it across my face and neck. God only knew how long I'd been without a shower or a proper bath. I could see all the grime from the last week or so being washed away, along with the sticky residue of Yaknaur's—

I freeze and glance up to them. They're both watching me closely, heads tilted as if they've never seen a person bathing before. Memnis edges nearer, hesitantly. He catches some of the water in his grey palm and then throws it over my covered shoulder, trying to help me in my task to be clean. I don't know whether to be pleased with him or move away. All I know is that the pool feels amazing, a comfort I'd never even realised I'd missed, until now.

Yaknaur eventually joins in as well, clearing away some of the mess he'd left across my skin. He manages to keep his curved claws out of the way, but the broadness of his palm hovers over my left breast, slipping under it to cup it.

"Hey!" I swat at him and step back. He appears disgruntled, as though he's about to bark at me for daring to get in the way of his task. "None of that," I say to him pointedly, wrapping my arms around my waist. Although I'm still wearing my flimsy tunic, the material has now gone transparent and thin, revealing the flushed pink tips of my nipples.

I'm too busy scowling at him to notice Memnis is pressing and towering against my side. It only comes to my attention when his hand slides down and caresses the curve of my backside. I pivot and try to deter him away as well. They both chuff and it eerily sounds like they are chuckling between themselves. Amused. I frown at them both as they begin to crowd in closer.

What are they–

Without warning, more hands fall upon me. I barely have time to voice a complaint when two solid male bodies are caging me between them. I squirm a little. The top of my head barely reaches their upper midriff, causing me to feel tiny in comparison. Together, they curl over me and reach out again.

"Stop…" My voice trails off as claws graze against my ribs, edging down towards my hips. I shiver just as another hand delves into my hair, testing its strands between careful yet deadly fingers.

I had half expected them to grab at me, to become impatient and violent with their petting. Instead, they seem to be taking their time, as though eager to learn me. It's oddly erotic, yet not entirely sexual either.

My breast is cupped again. The weight of it swells, growing heavier in response. I don't know who's doing what or where, but my limbs are becoming unstable and weak like molten wax. Heat is spreading through my core, slithering deep in a place where I should not be experiencing such things.

"Oh god." I groan the whisper, my head falling back against a broad chest as a hand sneaks its way lower and between my trembling thighs. As soon as I'm stroked there I know I am wet. My sex feels swollen. Aching.

This had to stop , I argue mentally with myself. I should not be enjoying this. This is all wrong. So very, very wrong. They were aliens for crying out loud. Creatures who hunted and killed other species. Humans, like me. I should move away from them. Now.

A sharpened digit glides between the lips of my sex. Exploring. At one point it presses against the puckered hole of my anus and I squirm away.

"No," I gasp as my cheeks burn. "Not there."

Not even Jason had touched me there before. Anal sex had never appealed to me, nor him either. Our first time had been nothing short of awkward and most of the time after that resulted in me having to fake it. Quickies had been more of his kind of thing. He had never been a patient lover, focussing mostly on his own needs rather than mine.

Yaknaur ignores my rejection, continuing his pursuit of my rear hole. He seems intrigued by it, even stooping down a little in an attempt to peer down and see for himself what I was hiding there. Clearly, these guys had no sense of personal space or manners. They simply helped themselves to every part of me.

And yet still, I hadn't moved from them. The realisation of that fact makes me shudder and want to scream at myself for my idiocy.

Together they emit a long chorus of trills and clicks. The low hum of it vibrates against my skin, surrounding me like a subtle lullaby. Their hardened bodies slide against my softer one and for some reason it makes me want to rub myself back.

Memnis roams my form curiously. Whereas Yaknaur is more eager to explore with his hands. I give a yelp of surprise when his knuckles bump against the swollen nub of my clitoris. His head shoots up, but he doesn't move away. Instead, he watches me and repeats the gesture, grinding against my sex with a firmness that makes my insides coil tight.

"Oh god...Yes, there," I pant and absently begin to roll my hips into him. "Right there. Don't stop."

He sneers at me with a flare of his mandibles. The eerie colouring of his eyes brightens further in a single shade of unadulterated hunger.

Memnis finds my nipples and caresses them lightly. He stiffens a little when I give a whine but swiftly return to stroking their delicate tips.

Before I know it, I'm writhing against them both. I push back into Memnis and bumping against the solid bulge of his groin. I roll my hips and my clitoris is captured and rubbed. White-hot pleasure smashes through me like a fist, dragging me higher with each frantic beat of my heart.

Sucked into an abyss of sensation, my head swims and is unable to focus. All I can see, hear and smell is them. I'm swallowed between them like a trapped bird. Helpless.

I shouldn't be doing this. I shouldn't be allowing this to happen, yet I cannot for the life of me bring myself to push them away. Their skin is rough and abrasive against mine, making me shiver. Without thought, I arch back into Memnis, like a cat that is seeking out more attention from its owner. The back of my head makes contact with his chest. His low purr rolls down my spine as his mouth splays into the thick mass of my hair.

Something thick and heavy pushes against my rear, only to then breach its way between my partially-enclosed thighs. Sucking in a breath, I look down, shocked to find the purpling tip of an erect cock peeking its way out through the tangles of my curls. Its hot length slide through my swollen vulva, bumping against my clit. The knobbly, leathery texture of it feels alien and strange, but not entirely unpleasant. A groan flies from me and I hear them both trill a call in response. Memnis' cock is impressive, to say the least. So much so that I find myself adjusting my stance to allow him better access.

I quiver, uncertain and eager all at once. Even though I doubted he'd be able to fully put it inside of me, a small perverted part of me wanted him to try. Torn, I simply stand there, letting them do as they please. Each tantalising stroke against my exposed sex is torture. This whole situation is wrong. So terribly wrong.

Memnis draws back and then thrusts through again, grinding surely against my throbbing clit. Each slow slide is causing it to burn, adding to my approaching climax like gasoline to a flame.

"You're…" I rasp as my voice begins to abandon me. "You're going to make me…cum."

A strong hand grabs the underside of my knee and lifts it. My legs part, spreading wider. I peer up at Yaknaur, noting the intense focus of his expression. With him this close I can see all the fine details of his skin. Strange nodules are lining the dome of his large skull. The grooves of his mottled forehead deepen with determination.

All the while, Memnis continues to drive against me, grinding against my pussy lips to the point where I can hear the slick of my own wetness echoing to my ears. I'm losing myself to them.

"Please," I beg to them.

Memnis emits a whimper and quickens his pace. He nuzzles into my nape, seeking something. His shaft is drumming a steady pulsating beat, thickening even further.

He's close. He's going to cum.

“Oh fuck.” My eyes roll and I plant a palm to Yaknaur's chest, needing something to anchor me to my sanity.

Yaknaur hitches my leg higher, giving himself a better view of what we’re doing. Through the haze, I see that he’s staring down towards our genitals. His free hand is enclosed around his straining erection, stroking it steadily. Even though he's only just recently masturbated, it is standing tall and rigid against his belly like a pole.

Our eyes meet and he presses nearer, touching the bulbous tip against my sex as well. He snarls low into my face with arrogance. With each stroke, his knuckles ride over my clit with purpose. At one point, the two males thrust together, meeting in the middle against my cunt.

“Oh!”

Out of nowhere, my orgasm hits me. My pussy clamps down tight, milking against emptiness as wave after wave of fire and bliss roll through me. With little else to do, all I can do is cry out and succumb to its wrath.

Memnis POV

“Good little female,” Memnis purrs into her mane, stiffening as the length of his *Ih’cros* jerks against her flesh.

She’s so incredibly warm. So moist. It takes all of his sheer will to not slide into her depths and take what he needs from her. To breed her in the only way a true warrior of his people would. The heavy globes of his sacks draw up tight and with a snarl, he begins to spill against her.

His brother, Yaknaur, snaps his mandibles. His release is coming upon a swift wind. His movements have become aggressive as he slides against her front, seeking his relief. The little creature between them mewls and his blood burns in response to the sound. With a roar, Yaknaur snaps forward and shoots his essence across the female's belly. Marking her.

She writhes like a snake, eager and trembling, and something in him shifts. A stirring in his chest blooms to life.

As one, they draw into silence. Whatever lusts had gripped the female were swiftly fading as he could just make out the light scent of her fear upon the air. Her stiffness told him that their closeness was no longer craved nor wanted.

“Be easy.” He tries to calm her. Though he doesn’t know why, the reason for her sudden distress moves him. Something within him is wounded at its presence. Again, he nuzzles into her, smoothing his large paws down her flaring hips.

“You have pleased us well,” Yaknaur rumbles. He carefully releases her and tugs on her fiery mane.

The female shudders and utters a noise as she looks down at herself. Both he and his brother's vibrant seed is dripping down her thighs and groin, painting her skin like a brand. The joint musk of their scents reaches his nose. Her heat levels rise sharply, focussing around her alien face as she curls into herself as though trying to hide from them.

To try and calm her further, Memnis scoops up some water and sends it splashing down her body.

“So, this is where you have been hiding.”

All heads turn to see Sin’Chila standing there, leaning against the door frame with his arms crossed in displeasure. His jaw flares and his eyes are pits of fire and flame. Sensing his ire, Memnis moves away from the female, for there was nothing more to be said or done. Their eldest brother knows of their misdeed. He had warned them that succumbing to the female was a sign of weakness, a lure to distract them from their ultimate goal; the Hunt. And so it had been.

Yaknaur squares his shoulders but refuses to fully bow down to their leaders will. He grips the hooman's hair tighter and draws her to him. When she begins struggles against him, Memnis fights back the urge to reach for her. A silent challenge goes between the two larger males, clear and as loud as a roar.

“Begin your patrol, I had said,” Sin’Chila says, glancing briefly down towards the hooman and then back to Yaknaur. “You have disobeyed and ignored my wishes.”

Memnis edges forward. “Brother, we—”

Claws slice through the air, silencing him swiftly. “No excuses.”

Ducking his head, Memnis moves aside and edges towards the door. As he steps around his towering brother, he eyes the other with a pointed look.

“Come, Yaknaur… We should go.”

Yaknaur huffs, expanding his chest as if to argue against him. Whatever inner battle he fights with himself soon dies and he slowly releases the female. With arrogance, he strides towards the door as well. Nothing is said in passing. No words are needed.

Sin'Chila POV

They had not heeded his warning, had not listened. He blamed Yaknaur, of course, as he was always trying to lead their youngest astray. Sin'Chila's blood – which had earlier been scalding hot with rage – was now simmering quietly beneath the cool of his masked expression. He'd given his brother a clear order and he'd ignored his command; something that Sin'Chila did not take lightly.

And yet…

With a scowl, he stands before the little pale creature that was now his charge. She awaits there with enlarged eyes. At the fear he sees lurking within them, something twists inside of him, like a rusty, dull blade. As much as he wanted to blame her for this mutiny, he couldn't find the will to.

Upon entering the bathing chambers, he'd been surprised to find all three of them in there together. At first, the need to bellow his displeasure had arisen, only to then draw still at the sight of them. His watchful gaze had missed nothing. Never before had he seen his brothers so weakened by their needs, so entrapped by the power of the tiny female writhing between them. Something about that image stayed with him, appealing to him greatly. Their sexual displays had almost destroyed his self-control.

The female had welcomed them to her like a mother would a babe. Her pinkened teats had peaked as one of them had played with them. He'd been unable to tear his sight away from her. He had fallen too. Completely become overcome by her spell, just as his kin had been. She'd arched and moaned so enticingly, nearly undoing him. It was as if all of nature and the powers of the worlds had converged and narrowed upon one single being. *Her.*

Even Memnis – the least experienced of their clan when it came to mating – had been accepted. A sight that had, at one point, send a shard of warmth through his chest. She had shared herself. Willing and responsive.

Even now, Sin'Chila's own arousal was throbbing against the plating of his armour. His claws, that were clenched tight at his sides, loosened as he felt the itch to reach for her. Would she accept him just as readily? He did not know. Nor should he care. After all, he was a warrior. The purest and truest kind of hunters did not ask for what they sought. They took.

Yet, then why did his feet refuse to move close to her? To simply cross the space and bend her to his will.

His answer comes in the form of her taking a step back away from him. Her narrow arms rise, shielding her teats. She hunkers low into the water as if to hide herself from his sight.

Amused, Sin'Chila chuckles under his breath. It would be too easy to show her how futile her efforts were to deny him. She was small and would not stand a chance against his strength. He could have her pinned underneath him before she even had the chance to blink her strange but alluring *hooman* eyes.

He grunts, about to bark the order that she come to him, but pauses. His pride demanded that he keep indifferent to her, to not fall as his brother's had. He had to set an example for them. And so he would.

Giving her one last lingering look, he sneers, turning away, before following the others out of the area.

Chapter 11

A week later…

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A human hand strokes against my hair, familiar and warm. With a sigh, I lift my head from a smooth chest and smile at the face above mine. Lazily, Jason's eyes twinkle at me. His smile is sweet, filled with so much affection that my chest tightens. Laid like this against the grass, with the sun on my hair and his body against mine, I feel bliss. Everything is perfect. As it should be. Yet somewhere in the back of my subconsciousness, a prickle of awareness nudges at me. Jason's image is somewhat blurred and distant. The ghostly sensation of his hand is but a breeze. Not quite real.

I'm dreaming…

"I love you, Jay," I find myself saying, although I'm quite sure why. My heart is pained even as I want to cuddle closer to him. My mind struggles to find truth in what is happening around me. I'm swimming in a haze. A memory. "More than anything."

He burrows into my hair, kissing it lightly. "I love you too, Lottie."

"I don't ever want to be parted from you."

He chuckles and it trembles through me. "And we never will." I believe every word that comes from his mouth, bathing in his attention. "I'll punch anyone who tries to take you from me," He jokes. "And you don't ever have to worry about me going anywhere, either. I'll always stay with you... Always." He draws me tighter to him and every fibre of my being surges, suddenly recoiling from the very thought of him.

Always?

I wake with a sob. My heart is pounding as the echoing remainder of my haunting dream lingers. I curl into myself as tears leak down my face. In the gloom, I can make out a mountainous male body laid nearby. Another is behind me; the heat of him is sliding against my back. Although I cannot see the third I know he's there, probably sleeping near my legs.

I clench my jaw, trying to bite back the noises that are threatening to creep up from my throat. The past and all the hurt it brings comes rushing at me like a sandstorm. Of times of happiness and regret. My dream had felt so real that for a moment I'd actually revelled in it, wanting it to be true, but as soon as I'd opened my eyes the harsh reality of it had hit me. It comes crashing down around me with a vengeance. I had trusted Jason. Given him everything. And even now, after some time of being separated from him, I was still wounded by his betrayal. *Always* , he'd promised me. And in the end, he had been the one to abandon me the most. Every moment we had shared now seemed to only mock me for my stupidity. They had all been lies. Empty nothings. Meaningless.

I rub a hand across my face and take a deep breath. It is early still, but soon the others would be waking to start the day. It would be just like every other day thus far. Eat. Reminisce. Try to stay alive. Sleep. Repeat. This was my life and existence, at least for now.

I eye the back of the hunter in front of me. Yaknaur. His strong presence – along with the others – is somewhat of a comfort to me. Even though they are alien to me, unpredictable and savage, at least there was someone here to keep me company.

I'm not alone.

Yaknaur POV

Something is wrong with their female. Yaknaur knows it as well as he knows his own flesh and being. Upon awakening, he had been tasked with providing her with food whilst Memnis took up patrolling the area. For many past dawns, she had often risen with them, eager for her meal. Yet today she did not. Even as he stood over her, he felt a shift happening. Her small body lays within their nest still, unmoving, save for the slow movements of her chest as she breathes. She does not rise with the rest of them. She does not even look at him as he leans over her.

“Come, female.” He crouches, nudging at her hip in an attempt to jolt her into wakefulness. When she does not move, he does it again, much more forcefully. “I said, *come.* ”

To his surprise, the little creature shrinks into herself even more. The length of her shoulders shudder as her pale hands cover her alien face. Soft mewls emit from her, like a babe desperate for the warmth of its mother's embrace. His irritation simmers, smoothing into an edge of concern. His broad brow lifts as he gazes at her. Perplexed.

“Are you wounded?” He says, softening the slightest. He reaches out, brushing the back of his knuckles against her moistened cheek. Her skin is warm to the touch but not alarming. So, what was it that ailed her? “Poisoned?”

“Leave me alone.” She speaks so quietly that even his acute hearing strains to hear her.

A low growl rises from his chest. Did she think to deny him, then? No. He would not allow such a thing. If she was in need of aid then he would do what was necessary to ensure her safety and health. He did not take pleasure in seeing her like this. No female of Yaknaur's would suffer or perish, he vowed it.

He rises to a stand again, thinking deeply. Considering it now, he realises that she hadn’t eaten her fill the last few solar turns. Nor had she drank or done much at all. He had simply taken it as her being content. But perhaps that was not the truth of it at all? She was, after all,

so small. It was difficult to know what she needed, even more so when she did not demand or make her complaints known.

“Up.” He says it again, reaching down for her as his frustration surges. His claws meet and clack together as they wrap about her tiny wrist. Her pulse is like a *Dugan* moth, delicate and fluttering against his touch. “You will obey me or I shall—”

She shrinks away from him, lifting her free arm protectively. That single movement is enough to still him completely. His own body stiffens. Did she think that he would strike at her? Yes. She did. He could scent the stench of her fear upon the air, light but repulsive all the same.

He drops her and rears back a step, uncertain of what to do. He stares at her curved back, trailing his eyes down the length of her form. Despite his aggression, she still had not moved. It’s almost as if she cannot or does not have the will to do so, and for reasons unknown to him, it is disturbing to see.

“Tell me, *hooman* .” He slowly pulls a lock of her fiery mane against his palm. “What is it that you need? Tell me and it shall be yours.” He pumps a clenched fist to his chest. “This Yautja vows it.”

Still, she does not turn to him. She does not answer. Her silence is like a strike to his gut. Brutal and fierce. With a huff, he jerks away. Very well then, he thought. If solitude was what she craved, then he would allow it. For now. In the meantime, he would seek counsel with his kin and see what they thought on the matter.

He quietly draws the assemble of fruits closer to her side before rising to stand once again. With one last glance, he strides from their chamber, all at once feeling a sense of rejection for her quietness.

He heads towards the main deck, pausing within the threshold with a frown upon his face. It was unlike him to seek out his brothers like this, but it was a task that needed to be done. For now, he would be humble and seek guidance from them.

His mandibles flare and a hiss emits from between them. Sin’Chila, who is standing by one of the control stations, rotates to give his a slight scowl.

“Why are you here, Yaknaur?” he asks, straightening to his full commanding height. “You should be watching the *hooman* .”

Yaknaur pauses, shifting his shoulders in a clear sign of uncertainty. He meets the gaze of his leader and eldest kin, letting his turmoil be known with that single look.

Sin’Chila chuckles. “The last time you appeared before me thus, Memnis had just stolen one of your most treasured trophies and hidden it within the *Gresian* Swamp.” His humour wanes as he cocks his head. “What troubles you, Brother? Speak.”

Yaknaur growls, the sound rolling into a small whine. “The female…”

“Yes?”

He huffs. “She is... fading.”

Sharp yellow eyes narrow on him. “How do you mean?”

Yaknaur steps further into the area and pauses to stare out at the vast wilds beyond the pane. His own hesitation is disturbing even to himself. He senses his brother as he slides up beside him. Like one entity, they stand together. Silent and strong.

“She has grown weak. Not in body, but in spirit. Memnis had warned me of her strange behaviour nought but a few turns passed, and I had not listened.” He clenches his fists tight, feeling the urge to destroy something, to tear into flesh and soothe his own raging vulnerability. “She does not respond to me as she should. Something haunts her.”

“Give her time,” Sin’Chila offers, placing a hand upon his shoulder. “ *Hooman’* s are strange creatures. What they do never makes any sense to us. Such things will never change.”

“It…” Yaknaur sneers, seeking to find the words. “…unsettles me.”

Sin’Chila stiffens for a moment at his side, his silence deafening. Yaknaur agreed that to worry about such things was unnecessary. Such weaknesses were beneath him. Concern and fear was not something a hunter should ever admit to, let alone feel. Yet here he was, troubled by the female and her lethargic behaviours. Whatever foe tormented her mind, he wanted to impale it onto the tip of his spear and offer it to her as a prize. If it were a living being, it would have met its end long ago at his hands. Yet there was nothing for him to do. There was nothing any of them could do. She was unreachable, growing distant with each passing of the suns and moons in the sky.

“If she does not eat soon, I shall force her,” he declares suddenly with surety. “I should drag her from her nest place and—”

“No.” His leader speaks, cutting him off sharply. Sin’Chila shakes his head. “Now is not the time for violence, Yaknaur.” His grip tightens upon his shoulder before he leans in and trills. “Leave it to me. I shall deal with her.”

They both nod in agreement and Yaknaur does not refuse him. He does not challenge or test his brother’s authority. For once, he is welcoming of it.

The next day…

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“Come.”

I was sat there, minding my own business, staring into space, deep in thought, when that command was declared from somewhere beside me. I blink, somewhat lethargically, and snap from my trance. From my position, sitting on one of the metal stands I often used as a bench, I turn and look up to find Sin'Chila there. His massive frame stands over me and my neck cranes back to meet his sunken but luminous eyes. I don't sense anything from his stoic expression. His mandibles are still and his gaze, though bright, is hard to read. I trail his figure with my eyes warily. He's like a huge bear at my side, intimidating and fierce. The thick attire of his black armour sits upon his massive frame like a second skin. There is nothing soft about him at all. Even the hard lines of his muscles and the sharp edges of his beastly face screams of brutality.

Memnis and Yaknaur had thankfully disappeared for the day, leaving me alone with the last remaining member of their trio. Unlike the others, Sin'Chila hadn't invaded my space as the others tended to do. He'd kept to himself, busying himself with sharpening his spears and weapons to gleaming perfection. That is, until now…

Come? I frown at that. I was beginning to get fed up of hearing that word lately. Clearly, they seem to think I am some kind of dog to be beckoned to and from places. I hadn't even heard him approach. Whatever he wanted me for, I didn't want to know. I Just wanted to be left alone; why couldn't they understand that?

With a forlorn sigh, I slowly turn away from him and return to my vacant staring of the wall. I had been deep in my daydreams before I had been interrupted. I had been imagining that I was back on earth, probably shopping or spending a day lounging on the beach. The mind was a powerful thing; I had almost been able to feel the heat on my skin and the sand sifting between my toes. The noise of waves and people chatting as they wandered passed. Even the odd bark of a dog as it—

A clawed hand wraps around my upper arm and I flinch. I lean away and jerk my head around again, looking first to the offending hand and then to Sin'Chila. I swallow back the thickness in my throat, uneasy. Though he's not showing any sign of aggression I can't help but feel he's displeased with me.

He says nothing, not even as he pulls me with ease to my feet. Whatever he wants, he's not taking no for an answer. I follow, reluctant, as he starts to walk towards the door, tugging me along behind him. The leathery texture of his skin is abrasive yet not entirely unpleasant. Absently, I take note of the colouring of it, intrigued for a second by the lightness of his palm compared to the rest of his darkened arm. His hold slips down to circle my wrist, firm yet not too tight.

He's acting strange, I realise. It wasn't like him to approach me unless it was to bark out an order of some kind, he usually kept his distance. Yet today, he'd sought me out for something, and that thought alone makes my anxiety flare.

"Where are we going?" I ask, only to be ignored.

Saying nothing, Sin'Chila draws me into a room; one I had never seen before. The doors swing open at our approach and I'm tugged inside. Any lethargy I had felt before was swiftly cast to the wind as I stare around at the space that awaited within.

Stunned, I blink, peering around.

The entire area was pretty much jam-packed with stuff. To my eyes, it looked like a dragon's hoard, wildly piled at the centre of the space, without purpose or care. From my position, I could see various familiar things. Clothing. Jewellery. Bags and torches. Guns. Knives. The more I gazed at them the more I began to realise… It's all human stuff. Every single thing here comes from Earth or from humans.

I step forward with awe. I'm hit by so many emotions all at once. My first thought is that I pitied whatever individuals had come across the hunters and had their valuables stripped from them. For without a doubt, I knew that they must have met their ends tragically. Despite that, my heart was warming at the sight of it all. It was like feeling the first joys of spring after a long and turbulent winter.

"This…" I utter, trying to form the words. I had so many questions. Why had they kept it all; being one of them. Trophies perhaps?

I lower to kneel before a small pile and reach out for a white comb nestled there. I cradle it carefully in my palm as if expecting it to disappear or fall apart in my hands at any moment. For some reason, I felt like I was holding something infinitely precious. Like a ruby or a diamond. How long had it been since I'd had the luxury of brushing my hair or of tying back or even using shampoo? Too long, I decided.

"Take what you wish." Sin'Chila's gruff purr comes from behind me. I can sense him at my back, not too close, but close enough for me to hear the soft clacking of his jaws.

I pause, uncertain. None of this belonged to me. If anything, these were all stolen valuables, things taken from people who had probably lost their lives. It felt wrong to keep them. Yet at the same time, I dearly longed to delve into the piles and see what else I could find there.

Without thought, my hand reaches out and snags a book. Its cover is faded and ruined, and the pages within are crisp and torn in places. I can barely make out the writing inside. I lift it close to my nose and smell the pages, all at once reminded of the times I had spent reading in my local library, browsing the vast shelves of novels there.

A noise clogs in my throat and I bite it back, hugging the book closer to my chest. I bow my head, hiding behind the curtain of my hair as tears flood against my lashes. There were so many things that I missed doing. Simple things, that I had once taken for granted. I lean forward again and find a tangled set of headphones. They're completely useless, as one earpiece is snapped off, but I can't help but wish for the chance to listen to some music. Just one song.

Suddenly, a wave of heat bathes against my side and I tilt my head a little to find Sin'Chila crouched next to me, eyeing the treasures with a mixture of confusion and disinterest.

"Does this…" He clacks lightly, gesturing with a wide sweep of his arm. "Please you?"

He returns to watching me instead. His beady eyes are fixed, missing nothing.

I don't want to answer him. I'm afraid of what my answer will be. Part of me wants to say *no* but I know it would be a lie. I hold the comb and book closer to me and stare at the rest. All of these goods had been stolen and collected from the people of my world… Just like me.

"How long do you intend to keep me here?" The question flies out before I can stop it. My voice is low and meek, but I know he can hear me.

Sin'Chila grunts and rises to his feet, towering over me. "This, again."

My head snaps up and I glower at him. "Yes, *this, again."*

Claws find purchase on my chin, lifting it. I flinch a little at the unexpected contact. Our eyes meet and I sense something passing between us. Something silent but tangible. Everything about him is alien to me. From his strange discoloured skin to the hideous structure of his face, and further still. Yet there is no mistaking the dominance that was now tightening its way across his muscled form.

He growls low. "Listen to my words and hear them. I will not speak them again." He bends over me, moving his face close to mine. His mouth flares wide with a hiss. "You belong to us now. From now until I take my last breath, you shall be here."

It takes a moment for my chip to complete the translation, but in the end, I understand his declaration loud and clear. They have no intention of letting me go. None at all. I was stuck here with them until only God knew when.

I slump as defeat hits me hard. Deep down I knew this to be the case, I hadn't expected them to let me go at all. Yet for some reason, hearing it now only seemed to add one more nail to the coffin. Each day was becoming hard to exist through and I'd clung to the one remaining hope of possibly going home. And now there wasn't one.

I try to jerk my head away, to hide my tears. I don't want him to see me upset. I didn't want him to see my weakness. His grip on my face tightens and his head tilts at me in a silent demand for my focus.

"I don't want to be here!" I lash out and try to pull at his thick wrist.

I gasp as he yanks me forward without warning. He lowers, straddling his massive thighs over my knees as my front presses against his midriff. His skin is like a furnace, so incredibly hot to the touch. He smells of something oily and musky.

"You think to deny us?" He snarls, sliding his free arm around my back to anchor me to him.

I croak, trembling under the furious intensity of his eyes. My courage is waning, fast. I cannot find the will to speak again. I don't dare to.

"Know this," Sin'Chila bites out. The edge of one of his mandibles brushes against the side of my mouth and I shiver. "Here you shall never grow hungry. You will never know pain or taste the danger of deaths blade." His fingers loosen slightly and then slide into the mess of my hair to clasp at the back of my nape. The movement seems light and almost tender, yet it

carries an edge of possessiveness with it. “We are skilled hunters, pure-blooded and proud. And we would pave the ground with the blood of your foe, should you ask of it.”

I stiffen at that but then shudder against him. A low purr rumbles through him as he pulls me nearer and my hands fly up to press against the muscled wall of his abdomen.

“Give up hope of returning to your earth, *hooman.* For there is none.”

My bottom lip starts to tremble. “You’re a monster.”

His head tilts at me. “I do not know this word.”

I shove at him angrily, but it does little to move him. He’s as unmovable as stone. “It means you’re cruel,” I then add quickly. “And it means you have *no honour* .”

If there was one thing I knew for certain, it was that these terrifying hunters – though deluded in their reasoning they may be – were very proud. During the time I’d spent here with them, I gradually understood that having 'honour' was a big deal to them. Even though I did not really understand why or in what context they considered oneself honourable. To declare otherwise was an insult, and a large one at that. Especially to a leader. By saying such things, I knew I was playing with fire, but I had to try to somehow make him see things from my point of view.

I expected him to get angry. Hell, I even expected him to lash out. However, the eerie silence he gives me is downright terrifying. His eyes have turned molten with some unknown emotion. I squirm in his hold. Uneasy. His hand drops away from my face, more in surprise than anything else, it seems.

“You dare…?” He doesn’t finish his sentence. It’s like he’s offended beyond being able to retort with anything.

Encouraged, I slowly slide out from under him and rise to my feet. He moves with me. Together, as one, we seem to glide up into position. My head barely comes to his upper midriff, but my gaze does not leave his. His chest expands in challenge and so I level my chin at him. Defiant.

“You have taken me from my people. My home.” I reply even as he glowers at me. “And now you expect me to be grateful for it?” I shake my head. “Sorry to disappoint you but I’m not. Not at all.”

Sin’Chila advances, practically casting a huge shadow over my small self. I inch back a step and then force myself to stop. I refuse to be intimidated by him. I won't.

“You forget, little female,” he clicks swiftly, sweeping his arm aside in a gesture of growing fury. “Your *people* left you to die by our hands,” he mimics with a sneer before spitting. “Your pitiful *mate* abandoned you. He was not worthy.”

I flinch, wounded. He said it in such a way so as to torment me, but I had not forgotten about it. How could I? I would not forget the deed for as long as I lived, I was certain of it. But that

didn't mean I was such a hopeless, lost cause that they could just sweep me away and keep me, like some kind of caged pet.

"I don't care about those things." I lie easily. "What I care about is my freedom."

He snorts derisively.

I lift a brow. "What? Don't you?" At my question he stills and I edge towards him, my daring growing. "Tell me something, *oh great warrior* . If humans took you away from your brothers and caged you, would you thank them? Would you also not try to escape and return back to your homeland?"

His mouth ripples as he clacks a mocking chuckle. "They could never accomplish such a thing. I would kill them all, without hesitation." He thumps his chest with a fist, glowering down at me with determination. "This hunter would die before submitting to a *hooman* . He is no one's pet."

I let his words sink in around us before finally replying. Quietly. Solemnly. "And neither am I."

Something shifts between us. The air tingles, thrumming with some kind of charged energy. I can feel it against my skin like a physical touch. Something in his eyes changes, their fiery brightness dims a little. I wait for him to come back at me something arrogant or cruel, but he says nothing. He leans forward suddenly, crowding my space and taking me by surprise. I do not look away. He's testing me for something, of that I am certain. He searches my face and them trails his eyes down my length briefly before lifting them again. Heat rushes over my skin as he hisses, flaring his jaw wide. I can see the fleshy insides of his mouth and its disturbing to say the least, even as some morbid part of me stares at it curiously.

Face lowering, he hovers close to the side of mine. He makes a strange noise, inhaling a breath. It is then that I realise he's sniffing me.

What the...

"Keep them."

Taken aback by the comment, I frown at him and lean back. "What?"

His thick ropey locks sway as he jerks his head towards the pile of objects nearby.

"They are yours now…" He hesitates. For a moment, I almost think he's about to nuzzle into the side of my neck, but he shifts away and starts to head towards the door. "Let it ease your sorrows."

"I…" *I don't want them.* It's literally on the tip of my tongue to shout at his powerful back as he strides away from me. But then I pause.

Ease my sorrows?

By now he’s gone and I am alone in the room with all the vast treasure of memories sat around me. I peer around at it all, stumped. Any frustration I'd felt is reluctantly fading away, being replaced with something else. Something more concerning. I try to deny it. I try to hide away from the truth of what had just transpired between us, yet it refuses to be denied.

All of this… Had he done this for me? Had he – this frightening brute of a man-killer - somehow known that I’d been struggling and had tried to… comfort me?

I gawp at the now-closed exit he’d just left through. Alone in my silence, I simply stand there. Moved. Disquieted. And all at once immensely grateful and confused.

After all, what kind of a cold-hearted beast concerned himself with the distress of his prey?

Chapter 12

Days pass and strangely enough – and somewhat with reluctance on my part – I find that my mood is lifting a little. Begrudgingly, I admit that the things Sin'Chila had offered me had given me a small taste of joy. In fact, for the last few days, I'd done nothing but hide away in that special room, sorting through the endless items and picking out bits and pieces to keep. After all, it's not like anyone else was going to use them. Right? Why waste it all.

After using the comb I'd found, my hair was now a silken mass of waves down my back. Even though it wasn't necessary, I found myself brushing it at least three times a day, enjoying the feel of it through my fingers. Some of the clothes I'd found I'd kept too. Now, instead of wearing the same, flimsy make-shift tunic, I could now wear the odd set of trousers or a t-shirt should I wish to – even though Sin'Chila seemed to dislike me doing so. I'd also managed to find some more books to try and read. Most of them were either bibles or in foreign languages that I couldn't understand, but at least it was something to keep myself occupied with.

Sitting crossed leg before the firepit, I turn one crinkled page and squint down at the tiny writing, trying to decipher the words. I see a few illustrations here and there and recognise it as an old scientific encyclopaedia of some sort.

Something nudges my side and I turn my head to find a crude knife hovering inches away from my face. A slice of very raw-looking meat is hanging there, caught between the blade and a clawed thumb. I peer up towards Yaknaur and he jerks his arm nearer, gesturing for me to take the food.

I chew on my lip, uncertain, even as my belly grumbles with hunger. So far I'd only ever eaten fruits here, meat was something I tried to avoid. Had it have been fish I might have taken it. That was something I was content to eat without fussiness. It was a good job Yaknaur was an excellent fisher and often kept the ship is high supply, otherwise, I'd have been screwed. The thing he was trying to give to me now looked like it was about to sprout legs and wander back into a field somewhere. After all, I had no idea as to what kind of creature – animal or human – it had come from. I shudder just thinking about it as a droplet of blood drips down and splatters against the floor.

"Um," I shake my head slowly, trying not to gag. "No thanks. You have it."

Yaknaur grunts at me and shakes his head before devouring the piece himself. Gawping, I watch the tangle of his mandibles ripple as he swallows it down without even chewing it first.

Belatedly, I realise I'm still staring but only look away when something tugs on a lock of my hair from behind. I flinch a little, but then settle, remembering that Memnis is sat there at my back. Although his body isn't touching me, I feel his heat. His breath glides across my nape. With light fingers he toys with my hair, braiding and adding the odd bead here and there. When he'd first taken up position and begun his task, I'd tried to discourage him, but he'd been determined. After a while, I'd grown used to his closeness, opting to ignore his petting.

I only hoped that whatever it was he was putting into it was only innocent stones and not something more sinister.

Sin'Chila is nowhere to be seen today, it's his turn to go out and patrol the area. That left Yaknaur and Memnis to 'babysit' me for the day. Not that I needed them to. I didn't need them hovering around all the time, especially when—

"What is this?" Yaknaur leans forward and tugs at the thing dangling around my throat.

Protectively, thinking he intended to break it, I clutch it into my fist. I then stare down at it and frown. "This?"

It was a necklace. One I'd found amongst the collection of stuff that Sin'Chila had given to me. It wasn't anything special, only a cross. The pendant itself was some kind of metal; possibly handcrafted. The chain part, however, was only a plain piece of thick string. I'd kept it only because it had reminded me of my father. He had been a devoted Christian and believed that faith in God would solve all unhappiness and problems in life… If only that were possible.

"This symbol is unknown to me," Yaknaur states, trilling as he peers closer at the crude piece of jewellery.

"It's a crucifix. It's erm..." I shift my position a little, uncertain of how to explain the concept of God and religion to them. Did they have one themselves? I didn't rightly know. Their culture and ways of life were so much different from that of humans. "It represents faith." Is all I managed to say.

" *Fay-ff?* " Yaknaur mimics poorly.

I shrug. "Yeah. Like, believing in something even though you can't see or feel it." I was babbling at this point. I had no idea how we even got onto the subject, but clearly Yaknaur was curious. His bright yellow eyes drop to the pendant and then rise to my face.

"Like honour?" He asks.

I give a small nod. "Kinda. Yeah."

"And this?" Memnis saves the moment by reaching for something beside me. He lifts it into view and I stare at the spoon clasped between his gnarled dark-grey fingers. The tablespoon looks more like a teaspoon in his huge grasp. "What is this?" He presses his thumb to the rounded tip and sneers lightly. "It is too blunt to make a kill with. Useless."

The spoon gleams silver in the light, reflecting the flames of the fire nearby. I reach for it and take it from him carefully.

"It's a spoon."

" *Spoooon* ?"

I bite back a giggle. "Yeah, it's for eating with, not stabbing things with."

This wasn't the first time they'd misunderstood the uses for some of the things I'd found. At one point, I'd discovered a bra amongst the rubble and their first assumption had been that it was a snare of some kind for hunting with. I'd almost died trying not to laugh. It felt strange to be wearing one again, even if it was a tad size too large. I glance down at my chest, shifting the piece under the loose shirt I'd scavenged and–

A terrifying scream penetrates my wanderings. Loud and sharp, it echoes around the room like a gunshot. It sounds frantic and fearful. Deep. Incredibly and undeniably human.

What the…

I rise to my knees, looking towards the doorway. I can hear a commotion going on in the corridor beyond. A struggle is occurring.

"What is…" I begin.

"Our brother has returned and has brought us a gift." Yaknaur trills and slowly starts to rise to his feet. Memnis follows and then I too until we're all turning in time to see Sin'Chila's huge powerful frame striding into the area. The door swooshes open and all at once, my insides drop.

"Let me go! Please!"

Sin'Chila is carrying a man. Quite literally holding him with only one hand as the poor guy dangles there, tied up with various ropes and netting. The man's fingers claw at his trappings, trying to break free. His dark eyes are round and huge with fright. Terrified.

I take a small step closer and peer at him. I know this man. I recognise his face and as soon as his panicked gaze falls to me I know he recognises me too.

"Li?"

"Charlotte?"

Oh god… It *was* him. He had been one of the men in Croydon's group. They'd caught him. The question was; What were they planning to do to him? My stomach curls with dread.

Before I can gather myself, Sin'Chila strides towards one of the cages and effortlessly throws the human male inside. He's slammed down hard and I hear him suck in a breath as though winded. His Asian features are bruised and bloodied in places, as is his shoulder, which looks to have been stabbed or shot with something.

"Oh my god." I rush forward without thought and kneel by the cell bars, clasping them as I peer in at Li. "What are you…" I struggle to even speak. "You shouldn't be here."

They'll kill him. I know it deep down as I know my own name and self. They arere hunters and he is a human male in their territory. They will do unthinkable things to him and more besides. Staring at him now, I shouldn't feel the amount of pity as I did. He, along with the others, had left me behind to my uncertain fate. Yet part of me hated the thought of him dying

this way. He was a human, like me. And whilst he'd been part of the group, I couldn't hold him entirely responsible for what had happened.

"You're alive?" He crawls towards me and grabs for my hand. His fingers are cold like ice and his arms trembles. "But how?"

I don't answer him. I don't really know what to say. Part of me is angry at him and another part of me feels strangely guilty.

"Please," he rasps in a broken English accent. "Help me. You have to make them—"

A strong, huge hand latches onto my shoulder. In a heartbeat, I'm pulled away from the bars and spun to find Sin'Chila's hulking self towering over my smaller form. I flinch back, noting the furious brightness of his eyes. They're practically burning at me. If looks could kill, I'd be a corpse upon the ground right now.

"This male is known to you?"

Oh dear… I squirm in his hold. His gnarled fingers are bruising against my shoulder, pinning me into place.

I choose my words carefully. "Um… kinda."

The thickened flesh of his brow rises slowly.

"Ok, yes," I try to fight back the squeakiness in my voice. "I know him." I then reach for his muscled arm, pleading. "Please. What are you planning to do to him?"

Memnis and Yaknaur have disappeared somewhere behind me. I can hear their grunting chuckles as they torment the human in the cage. I can't see them, but I know they're eager to create chaos. I can sense it upon the air like a horrible aroma. Malice and testosterone is crowding around me, suffocating.

"He is my prey," Sin' Chila clicks, thumping at his chest with pride. "His death will bring me great honour," he then adds with a purr. "His sacrifice will be in your name, my gift to you."

Sheer terror hits me. "No! You can't!" I pull away from him harshly and back up towards the cage door, blocking the way. Yaknaur is trying to swipe at the figure inside with his deadly blackened claws and its enough to make my fury spike.

"No?" Sin'Chila echoes ominously low. He moves forward a step, closing in on me.

"Let him go," I say, attempting to keep my voice level, even when my legs begin to shake from beneath me. "He's not a threat to you. You don't need to do this."

Memnis stills on one side of me, snapping his head around in shock. Li emits a whimper, I can hear his chattering teeth from behind me. The poor man was near enough in hysterics.

Yaknaur sneers, drawing away just enough to flash the inside of his horrible mouth. "Let him…. *Go* ?" There's no denying the mockery in his tone. I'm walking on ice here with

them, but I can't seem to stop myself from at least trying to help Li. I can't sit by and do nothing.

"He's a friend," I try to explain, "An ally."

"And now my prisoner," Sin'Chila growls, his scowl growing even darker.

"What...wait. You can understand them?" Li whimpers and I realise then that he doesn't have a translator as I do. He has no idea what's going on. "Holy shit, what are they saying?"

Any sense of peace I'd felt earlier was now slowly falling away. Earlier I'd found some contentment with Menis and Yaknaur, even appreciating their odd company. But now brutal harsh reality was sinking its fangs back into me. This was it. This was the truth of it all. Had all my sense of security been false? Had I been so blinded by the fact that they hadn't harmed me yet that I'd actually thought they were anything but what they were? They were predators. Yautja. This was their nature, through and through. I was never going to change that, no matter how much I tried. My pleas would fall on deaf ears.

"Don't do this," I whisper, dropping my head a little. Hopelessness swirls about me in a current of growing misery. I don't want this to happen. "He's hasn't—"

Suddenly a human hand fists into the back of my top and yanks me against the bars, almost strangling me in the process. A desperate voice shrieks close to my ear. "Please, don't let them kill me!"

Before I can even blink, Yaknaur lunges and a sharp snapping sound is heard. Li screams out in agony and his hold drops from my person.

"Yaknaur, no!" I pull at his huge arm, but to no avail. He's got Li by his wrist, almost crushing it with his easy strength. "Please, don't! He meant nothing by it, he's just scared! Stop!"

Yaknaur ignores me completely, snarling close to the human on the other side of the bars with even deadliness. "You dare to touch our female?"

Li bellows even harder, writhing against his hold, seeking to be free. He's on his knees now, as pale as a sheet.

"I…I'm s-sorry."

I open my mouth to speak, but Sin'Chila beats me to it.

"Move." He says to me, cool and without a single shred of mercy about him.

Things are escalating quickly. I'm losing control of the situation. Fast. I don't know what else to do. My entire body is shaking. I'm just as scared as Li is. My brain is whirling, I cannot think clearly.

"His fate is sealed." Sin'Chila reaches for me and grabs for my arm.

I dig my heels in and grab for one of the bars, persistent in my growing panic. “No! I won’t!”

There is no gentleness in him at all. No remorse. His monstrous, gnarling face is more horrifying now to me than it ever was before. The spikes across his domed skull shift in agitation. His mandibles spread in a hiss.

“Are you nothing but animals?” I cry to them and my bottom lip begins to wobble.

I hate this. I hate what they’re doing. I look to Memnis, pleading with my eyes. He is the softest of the three of them. He was always there to support the others and me. And I needed him now, more than ever.

Please, help me . I beseech to him silently.

He glances at his brothers, uncertain. He gives a low huff before jutting his chin to the side, turning away from me. I don’t know why, but that gesture alone makes me want to fall to my knees and cry.

“This does not please me,” I try again against a sob in my throat. These were words they had used often to me. They had some kind of importance to them, I was sure of it. Maybe they would work? At Yaknaur's low growl, I take a minute to glare at each and every one of them. My limbs are shivering but I keep my chin fixed and firm. Determined. “ *Your female* is not happy and so I’m asking that you let him go. Right now… In fact, I command it!”

All noise dies then, fading into a terrible, ominous silence.

“ *Command* ?”

Something shifts in the air around us and I instantly regret my words as soon as I say them.

All three of them turn to fully face me now. As one unit they advance and close in around me from all sides. Someone’s claws clasp the metal by my head, caging me in. Another from the other side. A trio of huge male bodies surrounds me like brick walls. Inescapable. Claustrophobic even. Their heat and musky scents wrap around my senses, slipping into my very blood.

I cringe back, frightened and yet flushed with a small slither of excitement. I lift my arms protectively just as Sin’Chila leans in, pressing himself against my quivering palms. His skin is leathery and sleek like a snake. His abdomen is like granite, without a single inch of softness to it.

“Look at me.” His voice is laced with threat. Heavy and husky.

I swallow thickly but do not move. Talon-like fingers dive into my hair and slowly, without mercy, pulls my head back from behind, exposing my throat. I whimper as I'm forced to meet Sin'Chila's eyes. All of my courage drains away, leaving only helplessness in its wake.

“Don’t hurt her!” I hear Li shout.

Sin'Chila lifts a hand and wraps it around the slender column of my neck, almost encircling its entire shape. There's no aggression or power behind it, only a pointed message as he breathes against my face. He's so large that he has to bend over slightly to reach my level. Our difference in size is monumental; I feel so weak and small. Like an ant amongst giants.

"You dare to challenge me, *hooman* ?"

A sound slices through the air beside me and I briefly look down to find Yaknaur has pulled a jagged blade from the strapping on his thigh. He holds it tight with eagerness. His eyes are not fixed on me, but on Li. He wants to spill blood. He craves it. He's shifting on his feet, dancing with barely contained excitement.

Sin'Chila snarls into my face again, demanding my attention. With a whimper, I lift my gaze to him. He's waiting for me to answer him. He's so tightly strung and expectant that it's almost as if he wants me to attempt to deny his authority here. I have no intention of doing such a thing. I don't dare to, no do I want to. But why can he not see how much this is bothering me? Does he feel nothing at all when he kills? No pity or regret?

"Once you have taken his life, will you take mine too?" It falls out of my mouth in a rush.

The question seems to stump him, for he leans back a little and the edge of his fury simmers just the slightest.

" *Grekt* ," he curses – whatever the hell that means. His hold on my throat loosens. "Never." Memnis makes a small trill of alarm from somewhere beside me.

His reaction was all the encouragement I needed.

"Would *you* ?" I ask to Yaknaur who jerks away with a sneer as though I've just spat in his face. "Will *you* ?" Memnis lowers his head.

I look to Sin'Chila once more and shake my head. "If you intend to kill him, then do the same to me too, because I would rather die than live amongst cowards who only make prey of the weak and helpless."

Two of the males around me growl. Clearly, I've hit a sore spot. I'm bluffing, of course. Completely and utterly bluffing. I don't want to die. Neither of us do. It was either sink or swim with this one, but I had to try.

"All *hoomans* are weak," Yaknaur grumbles, sneering at me in disdain. "They were created only to be hunted. It is their purpose. It is their fate."

"I'm a human too." My voice seems to echo in the silence that follows. For a long pause, no one speaks as my words slowly sink in. "Is it my fate as well?"

All three of them shift on their feet. They are not liking this. They appear torn as if undecided on whether to skin Li of his hide or not. Yaknaur grips the knife in hands harder, before grunting and sliding it back into place at his side. He steps and turns away from me. Memnis slowly does the same, showing me his back. A clear rejection of my presence.

Sin'Chila waits. He's watching me with a hawk-like intensity. Nevermind Li, he looks likes he's about to tear *my* head off with his bare hands.

"Sin'Chila." I plead to him quietly and carefully, placing my palm to his hardened chest. I stroke the smooth, hot flesh there, hoping to soothe him. "Please…"

In a whoosh of movement, he surges away from me. His warmth leaves me so swiftly that something inside of me cries in complaint.

"Get rid of him." Is all he says.

Memnis jumps into action. He opens the cage door and lunges for Li in the corner. Without grace, he pulls the poor man by his leg with ease, dragging him out and towards the main exit. Li is scrambling and shouting, sending my pulse racing with unease.

"Wait!" I take a step as they both leave across the threshold. "Where are you taking him?"

I hear Memnis bellow a roar and it resonates through the walls and floors around us like thunder.

I rush towards the huge window and plaster my cheek to the pane, trying to see what's happening. I can barely make out Li's slender form limping away down the ships loading ramp and into the protection of the trees beyond. He doesn't look back once. He's gone. Just like that.

I press my forehead to the cool pane and sigh with relief. I chew on my lip to stop it shaking. A sob forms in my throat.

It's done. It's over. He's free and I—

A hand snares around my nape, squeezing it firmly to the point of almost being painful. One moment I'm stood with my feet plastered firmly on the ground, the next the room spins and I'm bent over one of the station benches. I gasped, winded and surprised. My palms slam down upon its surface. A hulking body presses up behind me, practically swallowing my smaller one up like a blanket of steely muscle. I squirm, unable to move. The grip on my neck is pinning me down with clear dominance.

"You," Sin'Chila growls lowly against my ear. "I have been lenient with you for far too long, little female."

I try to rise up but his weight is like a boulder. He curls over me, sliding his broad chest against my back. Narrow, strong hips cradle against my backside. In this position, my back is being forced to arch, my ass rising in an almost sexual display.

My blood rushes, pulsating. Despite my shiver of fear, heat curls through my belly. Something demented corner within me responding to this. I don't know why or how, but it's intoxicating, charging at me out of nowhere.

"I'm…" It comes out strangled as my cheek is pressed against the cool metal. "Sorry."

I wasn't. Not really. All of my emotions are jumbled and rolling around together like a hamster trapped inside a wheel. I still cannot believe what has just happened, I'm held dumbstruck by it. Sparing a human life was not generally on a Yautja's to-do lists, that was certain. It wasn't in their nature nor culture to allow such things. The chances of these ones sparing Li had been minuscule, impossible even.

And yet, they had.

Sin'Chila snarls, planting his free hand inches away from my face. "Next time, I shall be victorious!" His claws embed deep into the steel, curving out grooves with his terrifying strength. "Next time, I will not hesitate. Provoke me and I will hunt down every living beast and creature in these lands and take their heads for you to see."

He doesn't need to say such things to me. My translator is struggling to keep up, but I get the point. He's livid and I'm not to do this again - I get it. I don't fight him, I don't even speak. I simply lay there, submissive, waiting for him to calm himself.

"Your disobedience deserves the harshest of punishments."

My brain is against me. My body is flooded with terror, but my mind is conjuring up its own images of the threats he speaks of. In reality, he probably means to beat me into my place, but with the way he is rubbing against me, I am thinking of other scenarios. Of him bending me over this counter and sliding deep into the cavern between my thighs. He wouldn't be gentle either, not at all. Perhaps his brothers would then take their turns too, sharing me and—

Oh god. I jerk myself into reality with a gasp. Where are these ideas coming from? What's wrong with me? My legs tighten and rub together as an ache forms between them.

Sin'Chila is still spitting his threats out to me, completely lost in his fury. He shifts against me a little and his groin grinds against my ass again.

Focus, Charlotte. What the hell is wrong with you?

It happens again and I try to bite back a small moan but fail miserably. As soon as it escapes my lips, Sin'Chila stills from above me. Heat floods my cheeks and I slide my eyes up and to the side to find Yaknaur is watching us from a distance. His chest is heaving slightly, but no longer with anger. His eyes are blazingly bright yellow beads in the darkened sockets of his skull.

A humid breath hits the back of my neck as Sin'Chila slides his face into my hair, inhaling with a hiss. He's sniffing me. And just like that, I begin to sense all of that pent up energy within him draining away. His mandibles snag onto my shoulder, nipping lightly and I jerk at the blunt sting of his bite.

This time, and with purpose, his thrusts himself against my rear. Something is growing in the V of his groin, as hard and as rigid as a metal pole.

I whimper, but I'm not sure why. I'm afraid and yet feverish at the same time. Unintentionally, my body moves of its own accord, pushing back into him. I wait with bated

breath, uncertain and charged with anticipation. I realise then that I want him to do something else, to do more. I want him to move against me again. I want him to –

“Do not disobey me again.”

I inhale a breath as he suddenly lifts away from me. At the loss of his heat, I shove myself upwards and away from the bench. I push my messy hair away from my flaming face, perplexed. My entire frame is shivering, hot and cold.

Sin'Chila eyes me carefully, narrowing his gaze. Without a further word, he strides away and heads out of the door. Yaknaur and Memnis spare me one last look each before doing the same. Stumped, I stand there, staring at the now empty room. It threatens to swallow me whole within its depths, leaving me feeling bereft and abandoned. I'm alone once again.

They hadn't assaulted me, nor had they touched me further. In fact, they'd hardly done anything to me at all. Yet for some reason, my emotions are troubling me. I try to ignore them and not acknowledge their presence. I don't want to admit to what I'm feeling right now, but it is there, as obvious a church bell on a Sunday morning, ringing loud and clear for all to hear. And one, in particular, is prominent above all the rest.

Disappointment.

Chapter 13

They're ignoring me, I can tell by a mile off. For days they haven't so much as spoken a word to me. The last few nights they've keep their distance, not even moving close like the usually do to sleep at my side. I understand that they're angry at me, but I did what was needed to be done. Li, after all, was a human. It wasn't in my nature to turn away from others needing help, regardless of who they were. I couldn't have abandoned him. I just didn't have it in me. What kind of a person would that have made me?

All morning I'd sat alone. Eating. Napping. Lost in my thoughts and worries. It bothered me that they were ostracising me like this. They did not leave me to starve and for that I was grateful, but it still made me very aware of how much I relied on them to survive, of how much I needed them to take care of me. Begrudgingly, I admit to owing them much in that respect.

Halfway through chewing on a rounded fruit, I look back over my shoulder towards the other side of the area. Memnis and Yaknaur's large frames are hovering in one corner as they practice their daily fighting skills. Memnis twirls his spear effortlessly, dipping and diving with an eerie grace that's almost entrancing to watch.

As if sensing my stare, he stills and turns his head towards me. He says nothing and stares back. I quickly look away and sigh. These guys were so confusing sometimes. Nothing they ever did seemed to make any sense. Were they really in so much of a bad mood because I had asked them not to kill something? Just considering the idea should have sounded ridiculous, yet with *them*, anything was possible.

I pop another berry into my mouth and chew on it. Something skids across the floor, lightly pausing against the side of my left thigh. I glance at the intruder, only to find a long wooden pole lying there; it's a staff of some kind.

I peer towards Memnis again. He gestures to the stick and then to me, before motioning for me to go to him. I almost choke on my food. What? Was he in that much of a temper that he wanted me to try and fight him to the death like a god damned gladiator? I called that a 'no thanks'. Surely he knew that I'd never stand a chance against any of them. They'd pummel me into the ground within seconds. I wasn't stupid.

"Female." Memnis calls and my shoulders flinch slightly. "Come."

Well, at least he's talking to me this time. Going by his light clicking, he doesn't seem upset at all, which is odd.

"Come," he shouts again and I sigh and rise to a stand.

I grab the pole and head towards him. I meet his eyes but quickly drop them again, uncertain. In the corner of my vision I can see Yaknaur sat in the shadows, sharpening his blades with slow dexterity. Each sinister drawn out slicing sound makes my skin crawl. He watches us quietly, missing nothing.

“Block,” Memnis suddenly orders and then lunges for me.

I don’t have time to breathe let alone move. I give a yelp of surprise and drop my weapon, rearing back as Memnis’ comes diving towards my shoulder his blade. I huddle back, only to find it hovering mere inches away from my body. Yaknaur snorts a chuckle and I have to fight back the urge to glare at him.

Memnis' tsk of reproval is like a hiss. He bends down and then passes me the staff again, shaking his head. The locks of his mane sway, as black as spilled ink. “Again.”

He jumps forward with a strike again and I try to lift my arms to block it.

“No... Like this.”

Two strong hands take mine and adjust them into position. I look up at him with a frown, wondering why the hell we are even doing this.

Before I can ask him, he comes at me again. I’m ready this time. I drop down a little and lift my spear, stopping his attack cleanly, even though it barely makes the lightest of contact. Had he have put his full power behind it, I knew without a doubt that he’d probably snap the wood in my hands clean in half, along with my head.

Memnis nods. “Yes. Good.”

And then it dawns. Is he… trying to teach me how to fight? I blink in surprise.

Well... this is... *odd.*

He comes at me again without warning and I duck to the side. We continue like that for a while, with me stopping each of his attacks or rushing out of the way. At one point, he tries to take it further and goes for a swift second strike, which takes me aback. He’s so fast that I barely even catch the blur of his movements. One moment I think he’s aiming towards my left, only to have him suddenly sweeping towards my right.

Being a useless *hooman* – as they'd liked to say – I made mistake after mistake. My errors were obvious. I was certainly no ninja in the making, but I had to admit, it was kinda fun to do.

I block another light hit and then sneakily go for a quick jab of my own, pressing the tip of my staff into Memnis’ broad chest.

“Got you,” I say with a small grin.

Memnis peers down at my weapon and then returns his eyes to me. His brow lifts as though impressed or - most probably - amused. He trills a low purr and rolls his shoulders as pure confidence stretches over his being like a shroud.

Oh… That’s not good. I swallow thickly as heat curls in my belly. I’m not sure of what’s about to happen, but I can tell by the sharpening of his glowing eyes that he’s got some kind of trick planned. They narrow on me, reminding me of cat when it's hunting a bird.

There's a swirl of movement. I try to swing upward, but my stick is caught by a powerful clawed hand. Memnis yanks on it and effortlessly pulls into him. I slam against his front with a grunt and his arm captures and bands around me.

"*Got you*," he mimics lowly across the top of my head. Curving over me, his strange mouth delves into my hair and I stiffen like a rod, uncertain of what to do. A rush of uneasiness, mixed with excitement, goes through me. He's so incredibly warm against my palms. And then a thought hits me…

I'd missed this. I'd missed being close to him. Since I had first arrived here on their ship, Memnis had always been the one to stay close to my side. His presence - which had once been terrifying - was now a comforting presence. I hadn't realised how much, until now.

As though sensing my very thoughts, he leans in closer and nudges at me with his flat non-existent nose. When I shyly lean away and peek at him, his mouth is clacking and chattering noisily; a sure sign that he is feeling content. He's happy.

Unable to help myself, I lift a hand and slowly reach for his face. For some reason I want to touch him. I'd never really has the guts to try and do so before now. I wanted to know what his tube-looking hair felt like.

Heat appears at my side and before I can fully acknowledge its presence, Memnis is suddenly grabbed by sharp dark claws. His body is lifted smoothly in the air and flipped over a shoulder, before being thrown a short distance away across the room.

I rear back, startled. Yaknaur straightens and sneers at his fallen brother, chuckling darkly.

"Distraction makes you vulnerable, little brother," he says.

Memnis shakes his head like a dog before slowly rising to his feet again. He scoffs, glaring at the other larger male.

Yaknaur turns to me then and I shuffle on my feet nervously. I step back from him as he eyes me from head to toe, taking in the spear I'm still gripping tightly.

"Come then, *tiny warrior*," he purrs, moving back a few steps, only to then drop into a deadly half-crouch. His talons flare, eager for a fight, and I chew on my lip warily. "Show me what you have learnt. Fight me!"

Was he joking? I seriously hoped so. Please say that he is. Yaknaur is easily twice as big as I am. He's huge and built like a house. Memnis was smaller and more like a housecat, whereas Yaknaur was like a fully grown lion. Wild and savage. There was no way that I planned to even attempt to take him on, it would be pure suicide.

Without mercy, he surges forward with a snarl. He tries to grab for me but I dive away and rush to the side to avoid him. He's slower than his brother; for that I am thankful. I spin to face him again with my heart pounding.

Yaknaur huffs and starts to stalk towards me again. “I can smell your fear, little female. Stand and face me, there is no need to be a *coward.”*

The word sounds foreign coming from him. It’s a term usually used by humans. It echoes to me, hauntingly familiar. And then it clicks… I had called them cowards the other day when I had been trying to free Li from them, and they had taken it as a great insult. Yaknaur was now repeating that same comment back to me, mocking me with it. My jaw clenches as my anger awakens. I straighten my spine.

So... he wanted to be childish and play it this way then, did he? Fair enough. If that’s how he wanted to—

A huge body slams into me. Arms lock around my smaller frame and spin me, drawing me back against a solid chest. The staff is placed under my chin in victory. I've already been defeated before I've even had chance to begin.

“You are too slow,” Yaknaur trills, his tone light. He’s sounds pleased with himself. Cocky.

“Ok,” I squeak. Although the pressure against my neck is firm, it is not choking me.

“So are you.” Memnis' voice appears, almost magically, from behind us both.

Yaknaur grunts as he’s jarred away from me. I jerk with the motion, but manage to escape his hold. I spin and watch as both he and Memnis battle it out with one another, hand to hand. I stand there in awe, unable to look away. They are like two trains pushing at full steam against one another, trying to force the other one back. Size vs grace. Swiftness vs power. Yaknaur swipes at his opponent with nothing held back, but Memnis dodges most of them with ease, making a few strikes of his own in the process. Their dark mottled skin is gleaming with sweat and strain.

With clever movement, Memnis manages to sweep one of Yaknaur’s legs from under him, sending him crashing to the ground with a heavy thud. He splays his arms wide and roars with victory.

Temptation itches at me and I reach for my staff again and quietly attempt to sneak up behind him. I raise it, about to bring it down upon his shoulder; my first small win against the hulking hunter. I bring its awkward length down with purpose just a Memnis turns towards me. His arm flies out, as fast a snake, and catches it in mid-strike.

Oh…

Strong hands lift me with ease from the floor and before I know it, I’m being lightly thrown over a narrow hip towards the floor. With a yelp, I brace for the impact that doesn’t come. Instead, I find myself landing onto something firm but padded, and oddly warm. Yaknaur grunts and I gasp to find my face inches away from his. His hardened body is under mine; I’ve been dropped on him like a sack of potatoes.

“Do you submit?” Memnis asks us both. Preening.

“I swear you have eyes in the back of your head,” I mutter in reply. My cheeks flame as I try to pull myself up from Yaknaur. My legs are either side of him, straddling him. My palms press into his rippled midriff.

“Yep, you win,” I say in a rush.

My pulse is roaring. I’m trying to rise to my feet as fast as I can, but all I can feel is the hardened flesh underneath me. I’m done with training for today.

I pause, noticing that Yaknaur hasn’t retorted to his brother yet. I had half-expected him to sling me aside and rise to the challenge coming from his younger sibling. He was, after all, a competitive creature, and fierce too. He did not take being beaten lightly. The moment his claws drift across my hips, however, all movements and thoughts still.

I glance down at him with a frown. He’s staring up at me with glittering sharp eyes. I’m doing my best to move away from him, but his grip tightens, refusing to let me escape. I know he’s not one to enjoy being pinned down or made to submit. I don’t want to anger him, not when things have been going so well between us again.

So, why won’t he let me go?

Yaknaur's POV

He feels her creamy thighs about him. This day she only wears what she calls a *tee-shurt* and so her luscious limbs are on sight for all to see. The material rises and he catches a brief glimpse of the strange loincloth covering her *snat*. The length of his mandibles flare and his mouth waters as he eyes its sleekness, unhappy that the tiny piece is a barrier between that which he seeks to see most. This is not the true position for breeding. A female should be pinned beneath her male. Taken. She does not do the taking. Yet the way her sleek body sits over him makes his blood stir and *ih cros* shift within its pouch. She is so delicate and pale. Her mane is a wild fall of fiery water down her back and her eyes are wide within her alien face.

Their brother, Sin'Chila, had made it clear that he was displeased with her. Yet neither of them could have kept away from her for long. She was like a beacon, drawing them in. Her scent from across the space had been his undoing. Tormenting him. Just as it was now.

She rides upon him now like a female demanding submission from a male, but there is no fight in this little one, no aggression. He was too much of a hardened warrior to allow such a thing to be. No being, of whatever gender, would ever make him surrender to them. However…

His paws slide up her belly and settle beneath her swollen teats. Her ribs are like a birds, narrow and fragile under his hold. As much he hates to admit such a thing, he likes this. He wants to see this little female try and stake her claim over him. If she thought she could best him then he would take much enjoyment in teaching her otherwise. Without thought, his thumbs skim upwards, cresting across the points protruding there. A sound echoes from the *hooman*, a light gasp. She is shivering now against him, her smooth face glowing with a pink hue as her strange mouth parts open. His vision picks up her heat signals with ease, noting the way it is most brightest at the apex of her mound.

And then he smells it... Musky sweetness. It dances upon a fragrant wind that beckons and calls to him like no other. It curls around his being like fist, hammering into him hard. He grinds up and into her, letting her feel the hardened shaft of his *cros*.

“Oh my god.” She breathes it. Her voice tight and husky.

A low growls come forth, rumbling through his chest. He wants this female, more than existence itself. In whatever way she chose or offered, he would take it. Take it all and then demand for more afterwards. Without thinking of it further, he meets her hooded gaze and speaks.

“I submit to you, my female. Breed me, if it is your wish.”

I freeze. Had he really just said that? Surely I had misheard or maybe my translator had made an error somewhere. Did he just ask me to… *breed* him? Holy Christ above. I’m beyond stunned into silence. I don’t even know what to say or how to respond. Of all the things I’d expected from him, this was not it.

He wasn’t agitated in the least. In fact, Yaknaur seems relaxed under my body, lazy even with the way his gnarled hands are sliding across my breasts.

I suck in a breath, trying to ignore the fiery shots of heat that strike at my core as he skims across one of my perky nipples. Even the slightest touch is making me want to writhe upon him, to relieve the ache building steadily within my crotch.

Yaknaur flashes a victorious grin at me, brushing against a tender peak once again. I moan aloud, unable to help myself. My hands fly up, latching onto his thick dark-skinned wrists. I can’t pull him away as he is too strong. Yet despite that, in all honesty, I didn’t want him to. The mixture of his roughened thumbs moving the lace of my bra across my flesh is sending me into some dark forbidden place. He experiments then and plucks at one, tweaking it roughly between two digits.

“Ah!” I arch into him, my breath growing ragged and harsh.

“Claim your prize,” he urges, lowering a hand to my hips, pulling me firmly down upon his extending groin.

Oh my god. Hearing such submissive words - from him, of all people – was doing strange things me. In my mind, I was imagining it. Of riding him slowly. Of having him tease and play with me, just like he is now, whilst I cum all over his dick.

“That is cheating, brother,” Memnis scoffs from my left.

Languid, my head turns to him. Through hooded eyes, I find him crouched directly next to us. His heavy frame sits there easily, but his molten gaze it fixated on what Yaknaur is doing to my breasts. He's curious, I can see that much, but there is also a hunger hiding there. His own hand lifts to me, joining his siblings, to stroke at one straining peak.

I gasp again, torn. I have to stop this. I *should* stop this. As soon as I finish the thought, I have two sets of hands upon me, stroking and rubbing to the point where I can feel moisture pooling within my knickers.

A noise sounds. Something jerks my body harshly and I almost shriek as Yaknaur rips at the fabric of my top and bra. They tear like mere paper under his strength and then he returns his focus to my now naked and bared chest.

It’s too much. I can’t take much more of this.

“Stop…” I pant, even as I begin to rub my damp cleft across Yaknaur’s covered cock, seeking relief. My clit is swollen, throbbing painfully. “We need to…. Stop.”

They don’t listen to me at all. Yaknaur’s powerful legs bend and his knees brace against my back to hold me in place so that they can continue their exploring. My pussy clenches on nothingness and I give a whimper.

I want more. I need more. I want to cum so badly.

Yaknaur takes a hold of my nape and draws me to him, plastering my bare chest against his. We both hiss at the heated contact and I squirm even harder to be closer to him. I have no idea what I’m doing right now, but I don’t particularly care any more.

He buries his face into my hair and then stiffens, growling lowly. I frown, wondering what is happening. I can feel soft sweeping movements against my ass. I turn my head as best as I can and look… Only to find Memnis knelt between Yaknaur’s slightly parted thighs.

What the…

It’s then that I realise what he’s doing. His arm is lowered, rising and falling with a steady motion as he touches me.

Wait, no.. That’s not right. I don’t feel him touching me at all.

And then it dawns...

He's stroking Yaknaur's cock.

I'm dumbstruck. I can't believe I'm even witnessing this. It's so strange to see, yet also incredibly hot. Memnis does not appear to be fazed in the least with the task he's doing and Yaknaur seems to be enjoying himself immensely; if the low growls and clicks were anything to go by.

"Do it now!" Yaknaur snarls suddenly.

I freeze, uncertain. Do what, exactly? I don't have much time to consider it further before the material of my underwear is slid to one side. Before I can even inhale a breath, a thick-headed hot cock is being pressed against my entrance, trying to push its way inside.

"Wait!" I try to push myself up but Yaknaur's arm is locked against my back, keeping me pinned to him. "I can't…" I pant as a glorious burn starts to spear through my cunt. He's stretching me oh so slowly. "You're too big! It won't fit!"

"We will," Yaknaur grunts, straining and covered with sweat with his efforts for control. "We *must."*

I'm scared. It's on the borderline of being painful, dancing on a knifes edge, but it's also devastatingly perfect. With each passing second, I can feel myself being forced open, further than I ever thought was possible. My mind is crying at me, warning that this was an impossible feat. Yet my body was complying to their demands, accepting them deeper.

"Take him, little female," Memnis purrs, stroking at my back with encouragement. "Take your male. He is yours to claim."

Of their own bidding, my walls clamp around Yaknaur's shaft. He hisses and throws his head, splaying his jaws wide in what I can only describe as victorious torment.

By the time we even get his bulbous head inside, we're both gasping for breath. My thighs are cramping from the strain of gripping his waist. I'm trying to take things slowly, but Yaknaur has other ideas. He's impatient, as always. His length is never-ending. Just when I think he's nearly all the way inside, I glance down and see I'm only halfway there.

Holy fuck. He's huge.

"Know this, my female." He yanks my head up by my long hair, forcing my gaze to his. "I have waited a long time for this. Too long."

"I—ah!" Whatever I was about to say dies in my throat when he suddenly surges up into me. My entire body is lifted with the impact of it. My slickened pussy clamps down at the invasion, sucking at him hard.

And just like, it begins…

His claws dig into my hips as he starts to lift me, only to then drive me back down again with a furious need. He's not gentle. Not in the slightest. Each pounding thrust he gives me knocks the very air from my lungs.

I love it. I hate to admit it, but I love every minute of it. I can feel myself tightening. My clit is catching and rubbing against the loosened netted material of his cloth. My core is coiling with fullness, bringing me closer to that pinnacle of bliss.

I want it. I want it all.

I start to move as well. Guided by Yaknaur's huge hands, I bounce on him, desperate to feed that furnace that was slowly growing into an inferno within me.

"Yes," He purrs, chanting the same words with each powerful thrust. "Good little female… *My* little female."

It doesn't take me long. I curl over him and wail out my pleasure as I start spasm around his cock. I'm cumming harder than I ever have in my entire life.

Yaknaur roars and follows me. His cock jerks hard within my channel, filling it with molten wet heat. It seems to go on forever. Just when I think he's done, another stream of his cum jets against my cervix, bathing it. I can even feel some of it leaking out between our joined bodies.

I'm panting against Yaknaur's chest, trying to calm my raging heartbeat. Sluggishly, I lift my head and snuggle into his neck, seeking my sanity again. Whatever madness had led me into doing this, I don't know, but I've never felt so satisfied as I did right now. It feels so right.

With a grunt, Yaknaur pulls out of me and I squirm as the sudden loss of him. His hand grabs for my knees, drawing them higher up against his sides. Tiredly, I start to rise from his chest, only to pause when his grabs for the globes of my ass and spreads them open, exposing my dripping wet cunt to the hunter still watching behind us.

"Come, little brother," Yaknaur trills, holding me firmer. "She is ready."

Wait... What?

Chapter 14

A low whine comes from behind me. I can't see Memnis, but I know he's there. Without a word, he settles up against my rear and the bulging head of his cock breeches into my sensitive flesh. He's not as big as Yaknaur, but I certainly feel him filling me. My channel clamps down in protest, still raw from Yaknaur's previous taking. His cum is still in me, lubricating Memnis' way into my body.

I close my eyes and moan, burrowing into Yaknaur's dark locks. I can't believe this is happening. I've just been fucked by an alien and now another one is doing it too. His brother, no less. I should be terrified. I should be fighting for my life and screaming the roof down. I shouldn't be enjoying this at all, yet I am. Some terrible, perverted part of me is bathing in this moment.

Memnis grips my hips carefully, he's somewhat hesitant. Instead of pummelling into me as Yaknaur had, he's drawing me back onto him, forcing me to ride over his length. Once completely seated, he snarls a hiss and simply sits there. Savouring.

"She is tight," he trills with hoarseness. "I will not last long."

I moan again at his words. His clicking grows frantic and needy even has his shaft begins to expand from inside of me. Yaknaur is keeping me pinned and opened to him, his hands are spreading me wide, I'm helpless to each sensation. All I can do is lay there and allow them to do as they please. There is something decidedly delicious at being pressed between two huge bodies. With one at my back and one against my front, I feel both imprisoned and thrilled.

With a sob of need, I turn my head away from them and press my cheek to Yaknaur's shoulder. Through the haze of my gathering lust, I spot a hulking figure hovering in the doorway. Glowing eyes are watching us from the shadows there, intensely bright and focussed like a hawk. Predatory.

Sin'Chila . He's here. He's seeing everything, watching as his brothers fuck me into oblivion. His attention briefly casts over all three of us as a whole and then settles with precision upon my face.

I'm not sure why, but I feel the urge to hide from him. Shame hits me at first, and then humiliation, followed by a torrent of pure animal lust. I'd always been a one-man-at-a-time kind of lady, always believing in being loyal and steady. But right now I was giving myself freely to them, without restraint or hesitation.

Without realising, my ass rises a notch which makes Memnis' next thrust burrow even deeper.

"Yes," Memnis encourages, almost gently. "That's it. Surrender to me, my little female."

Before I can find the chance to look away my body is suddenly swept up and overtaken with soul-shattering spasms. With a cry, I climax hard, squeezing tighter upon Memnis' shaft. I shudder against them both and Memnis surges forward with one last thrust, growling low as he begins to empty himself deep inside of my pussy.

"Oh, yes!" I gasp aloud, unable to help myself.

I hear thunderous snarls from all directions, but I'm not sure which belongs to whom. All I know is that I'm consumed by its noise. It swarms around me and sucks me into a place of pure bliss. A seductive but feral lullaby.

Sin'Chila's POV

Had he passed into the greater realms of death? Had *Paya* , the black warrior himself, come to claim his spirit and taken him into oblivion? Such a thing must have been so, for the sight before him had to be a dream; only, alas, it was not. She is there, the *hooman.* She is taking them both into her sleek body, accepting them with tiny mewls and cries that set his blood aflame with need.

In that moment, all and any displeasure he had held towards her died swiftly. Seeing them like this stirs something within him deeply. With a hungry gaze, he takes it all in, missing nothing. For once, in his many solar turns, he is struck silent.

His brother, Yaknaur, keeps her captured to his breast as their youngest drives into her flesh from behind. Their joined musks are heady upon the air, intoxicating. She does not fight them and there is no fear clinging to her, only arousal.

For a time, Sin'Chila had watched them together, his irritation flaring at how quickly she had drawn the two males back to her side like eager pups vying for attention. Like some sort of *Yama,* shaman, she had surely cast dark curses upon their minds, luring them into her.

This, however… He had not anticipated this.

As soon as she had straddled his brother, Sin'Chila had nearly come undone. Everything about her was a curious thing. From her slender limbs to the colouring of her skin and mane. His eyes found and followed her everywhere, wary and yet eager to behold more. Though she is shaped differently, her *snat* invites each of her males without question. She is a wanton and needy little creature.

Hotness coils and curls in his groin, causing his *ih cros* to rise. He envies his brothers deeply for what she had gifted to them. Each shuddering release bows her into them, forcing wild noises from her throat. Truly pleasing.

From across the space, she meets his gaze. Her *hooman* face is twisted in pained torment, revealing her need to him like a beacon. Her hooded eyes plead with him in silence, seeking something only he now could give to her.

She wants him. And should he go to her now, he knew without doubt, that she would submit to him as well.

He growls again, his entire length rumbling with its sound. All thoughts fade until only one remained. One single desire.

To claim.

Urged into movement, he steps out from the shadows and stalks closer to them. Memnis retreats, pulling out from her heat with a grunt. He shifts, moving to one side to allow him room to take his place. Sin'Chila lowers to a kneel and Yaknaur trills, meeting his gaze with a nod of encouragement.

"I see your hunger, brother," Yaknaur rasps, nuzzling into the female's throat. "Come. Hunger no more and take what is yours."

He lifts her higher against his chest, tucking her into position so that her rounded rump is level with Sin'Chila's groin. The slit of her *snat* is glistening with moisture. She's bared and ready for him.

Lifting a hand, Sin'Chila trails his claws down the length of her spine, revelling at the way she jerks beneath him. Her hips rise with eagerness. With swift purpose, he unfastens his covering and clasps the throbbing length of his *cros* . His sacks are heavy, drawing up tight in anticipation of what was to come.

He juts his chin to Yaknaur with a command. "Turn her... I wish to see her eyes as I seed her."

Doing as bade, Yaknaur begins to move…

I'm in a daze, snuggling into Yaknaur's warmth. My entire body is humming, satisfied deep down to the bone. I'd never felt like this before after having sex, not with Jason and not even when I'd been alone and masturbated. I hurt all over, but it is a fulfilling kind of ache that settles right into the core of my being.

What Memnis and Yaknaur had just done to me had been nothing short of pure, unadulterated fucking. They'd not given me sweetened empty words or tender caresses. I hadn't worried myself with pleasing them, as each of their powerful thrusts and grunts had made it pretty clear to me of their enjoyment of my body.

I take in a long breath and rub my cheek into Yaknaur's somewhat sweaty shoulder. Dazed, I arch a little, stretching out my back like a cat who had just received all the cream in the

world. Strong fingers glide down its length, inciting a shiver. Absently, I hear someone speak. Memnis has moved away from me now, but a new scorching heat has taken his place at my back. My eyelashes flutter open…

“Turn her... I wish to see her eyes as I seed her.”

I blink at that, surging awake as I recognise Sin’Chila’s gruff clicks. I barely have time to lift my head when I’m suddenly flipped over with startling ease. My entire weight is jostled and then pressed back until I’m resting against Yaknaur’s massive chest. I gasp in surprise, noting the ceiling above me and then look down to find a towering figure settling himself between my parted thighs.

“Sin’Chila,” I whisper his name as he leans over me. My heart leaps in my chest like a caged bird. I'd thought he'd left us a while ago, probably displeased with what we were doing, but obviously that hadn’t been the case.

My eyes flicker over him, roaming down his muscular frame and dark skin, and every rational thought fades when I see the thickness of his cock jutting against his belly. His face lowers, hovering only a small distance away from my own. There is a fire in his gaze, an urgency that nearly steals the breath from my lungs. Pearls of cum dribble down his shaft as he grinds it against my slit, teasing.

I chew at my lip, torn. I don’t know if I can take another round of this. I’ve already been ejaculated in, *twice.* My insides are raw, but already they are clenching in anticipation. Wanting him.

“Hold her.” The firm command is like a gunshot.

Without mercy, Yaknaur sweeps his arms under my knees, drawing them up tight until they’re almost touching my ears. I yelp as my muscles strain at the fixed position. I cannot move at all like this, not even the slightest. My own legs are pinning me back, sandwiching me against the wall of the muscled male behind me. My hips are being forced to tilt up, exposing my swollen cunt. To my disturbed enjoyment, more wetness seeps out from it and slides down into the crack of my ass cheeks.

Sin'Chila purrs, combing his bulging tip through my folds as though trying to cover himself with its stickiness. Up, and then down again. Up and down. Slowly driving me insane. At one point, he nudges against my clit and I jerk, moaning aloud for all to hear.

“Look at me.”

Helpless, I do as bid. The glow of his eyes penetrates me, forbidding me from turning away again. I feel like a rabbit that has become ensnared by a snake, entrapped by some invisible force. Something passes between us, tangible and heavy. Dangerously intimate. *Possessive.*

My mouth parts as the fat head of his cock breaches through the barrier of my entrance.

“Oh, fuck,” I whisper, scarcely able to draw in a breath.

An uncomfortable yet delicious burn wrangles its way through every muscle in my being. I can feel myself stretching for him, swallowing him whole inch by agonising inch. As if fighting him, my pussy clamps down hard.

“I can’t…” My head starts to roll, overcome with the building pressure.

“No.” Firm claw-tipped fingers find purchase upon my chin, forcing me back to him. “ *Look at me* .” He repeats, refusing to be denied.

His starving gaze misses nothing, he’s watching my every expression as he lazily glides his way into my tightening channel. Once fully seated there, he flares his jaws wide and sneers down at me with purely masculine triumph. His chest expands, heaving in as he suddenly draws back and begins to move within me. He gives me no warning, not even a hint of his intentions. One moment he's slowly pulling out from me and the next he driving back in with all the force of a rutting bull.

Sweat gleams across his chest and shoulders. He grabs for my hips, pinning them down as his movements become more frantic and wild. His ass, sculpted and strong, flexes with his efforts. I desperately want to wrap my arms around his neck and cling to him but they're trapped against my breasts. I want to touch him so badly.

I choke on a sob as shards of pleasure spear their way through my cunt. I’m already so close to cumming. My entire length is straining with it, seeking out that pinnacle of bliss that only they could give me.

“You are so big,” I admit with a flush.

“I am swollen for you, female. Can you feel it?” Sin'Chila hisses. Leaning upright, he stares down toward the apex of our joining sexes, observing it with a lewd satisfaction. His cock disappears almost completely inside of me and he rewards me a deepened growl of approval.

“Oh my god, that's so sexy.” At my whimper, he becomes wilder, almost lunging his entire frame over my smaller one. His narrow hips slam into me with careless abandon. My wall tightens, strangling him like a vice.

“Oh, please,” I plead, squirming in earnest as the searing peak of my climax rushes at me out of nowhere. “I’m so close. I’m going to cu—ahh!”

Suddenly Memnis is there, reaching between us. His roughened knuckles graze across the nub of my clit and I fall apart with a shriek. My pussy milks at Sin’Chila cock greedily as Yaknaur crushes me harder to him, forcing me to ride it out without mercy.

“Again.” Sin’Chila snarls directly into my face, full of sexual aggression.

I don’t even have the chance to question it. As if eager to appease him, my hips surge up as another orgasm rips through me like a storm.

“Again!”

Sin’Chila doesn’t stop his frantic pounding, not even for a second. My clitoris is burning with each rub of Memnis' fingers. My toes curl as electric sparks flutter through my cunt and all the way to my womb as my third climax hits.

“Yes! Oh fuck, yes!” I bellow, completely lost as Yaknaur’s mandibles latch onto my shoulder. His beastly growl is like an aphrodisiac to ears.

A whine follows as Memnis suddenly lunges over me from the side. His hips jerk as he strokes at his now hardened shaft. Seconds later, he bows forward, shooting his creamy cum all over my mound. It dribbles down over my folds and mingling with Sin’Chila’s cock which is still inside of me.

Sin’Chila drives into me once, twice, and then a final time before seating himself deep with a roar. Hot warmth jets against my cervix, pulsating like a heartbeat against my walls. For a while, we stay like that and all I can do is lay there and take it. I’m in a daze, trapped within a bubble of sheer ecstasy.

All three males rumble and growl together, singing a heated song of victory.

Slowly, the arms around my legs loosen and I am free to move. Many sets of hands pet at me, gliding across my hips, my breasts, my hair. My eyelids droop as a strange drunkenness envelopes around me like a blanket.

I feel bruised and sore, thoroughly used... but I love it. I had loved every second of it.

Arms sweep up against a solid chest and my head rolls sleepily. I’m being carried somewhere, but I don’t know where - I don't particularly care, either. The hunter holding me places me down onto something soft and a wall of male bodies join and close in around me.

“Rest now.” Someone says to my left and I whine, inciting another round of lulling trills.

“Our little female,” another says as a large face nuzzles into the side of my dampened throat. “You have pleased us well.”

The darkness pulls at me, sweeping me into its embrace like a loving mother. Arms and legs tangle around my own, heavy and yet welcoming. With little else to do, I close my eyes and succumb to sleep.

Chapter 15

Many days later...

I can't help myself. The more I stare at them, the more I want to touch them and see what they feel like. How had I not noticed them before? They look so strange to my eyes, unusual compared to my own. Quietly, I shuffle closer to Yaknaur's side. He's still fast asleep beside me, but Memnis and Sin'Chila have long since arisen and disappeared elsewhere. I'd intended to get up and do the same, only to get distracted by the sight of Yaknaur's huge feet.

I lean closer and peer at them further. I had never really paid them much attention before, until now. They're huge and oddly shaped. The skin of the soles are pale and thickened compared to the darker skin across the top. The toes are tipped with blackened talon-like claws and the main larger toe is situated further back, reminding me of canines dewclaw. But what really had me transfixed was the unique frog-like webbing joining between them.

Without thought, I reach out touch its leathery texture, prodding it experimentally. The leg attached to it jerks but then stills again. I slide my focus up towards his head and his wild mane of hair. Part of me had always wondered as to what those strange dreads were made of. Every time I had made brief contact with them they had reminded me of leathery appendages rather than hair. I bring my hand up, trailing lightly against one chunky lock. The bead there is smooth white, probably some kind of stone by the looks of it. I lift a ropey piece into my palm, feeling its texture. It's soft but flesh-like at the same time. My touch roams close to the side of his square inhuman jawline, dangerously close, but before I can suck in a breath, large gnarling hands find me. They gain purchase against my hips and pull at me. I yelp, plastered across a solid body, trapped against a formidable chest. I squirm a little, my heart pounding as my legs fall either side of a muscular waist.

I blink and peer down at Yaknaur underneath me. His tusks flare wide as his beady eyes narrow.

"It is bad luck to disturb a warrior as he sleeps." Although his tone is chastising, he doesn't at all seem angry.

I shift as my face burns hotly, acutely aware of how hard and rigid he feels underneath me. For some reason, despite all that we'd done and shared so far together, I feel shy and uncertain. It was still hard to wrap my head around; I had not long ago been mated by this male. And his brothers. And they weren't even human. How crazy is that? Simply being this close to him like this is making my blood sing with heat. My very skin ripples with awareness in recognition to him. His smell. His touch. His roughened hands. I can feel myself awakening to him.

His claws clutch me tighter and I glance down as one slides up to cradle under my left breast. My mind flies back, recalling all of the ways they'd caressed my body like this. Of the way they'd given me pleasure and made me cry out. I'd never had that before, not with anyone. And now that I'd had a taste of it my entire being seemed starved for it. Addicted.

My thighs tighten as moisture starts to seep between my thighs, dampening my underwear. Yaknaur's hairless brow rises slowly and he inhales a breath, hissing. I know without a doubt that he can smell me. He can probably feel my wetness sliding against his belly too.

"I'm sorry," I say, somewhat breathlessly. "I didn't mean to wake you up, I was just—"

"You are in need," he rumbles suddenly.

One of his huge arms sweeps underneath my bottom, lifting me higher against him. A roughened palm gropes the globe of my ass before sliding into the sanctuary of my panties. I gasp with a shiver as a claw brushes across my dampened folds there. I clutch at his shoulders for stability, practically digging my fingers in as I arch into him, giving him more room to play with me. He finds my entrance, prodding gently. My sex contracts, eager to be filled. Just as I think he's about to inside of me, he draws away and loosens his embrace with a grumble.

"Enough… now is not the time for mating."

Erm…what?

I blink at him, surprised and undeniably disappointed. His erection is standing proud and heavy under the fabric of his loincloth. He wants me, I can tell. I want him too. I'm practically ready to ride the living daylights out of him, and yet he's… saying no? I frown and lean back to look at him, somewhat dejectedly. He notices my expression and huffs a raspy chuckle, grabbing my ass again, squeezing it eagerly.

He leans up to rumble deeply against my ear. "My brother is eager for your attention and I have duties to complete."

I blink at him again and tilt my head, only to then sense a third presence in the room by the door. I turn to find Memnis' standing there, quietly watching us.

"Our brother awaits for you, Yaknaur," Memnis trills with an edge of sulkiness as he slowly crosses his arms. "It is my turn to watch *Lar-tee* today."

Yaknaur gently lifts me away from him and rises to his feet. At the loss of his warmth, my shoulders slump a little. I watch the way the lines of his back move, rippling with powerful grace. He's so strangely beautiful considering his monstrous size.

"Be easy," Yaknaur chuckles again with a stretch, "I have not forgotten. She is yours…for now."

Memnis steps from his shadowy spot to enter further into the room. His darkened armour creaks as he moves closer and I take note of the shining blades strapped to his thighs. He shifts his head and meets my gaze. His beady yellow eyes brighten as he chirps a noise in both greeting and victory to me.

"This is not over," Yaknaur promises, casting me one final burning look before striding towards the threshold.

All arrogance and pride, he doesn't even attempt to bother with covering his swollen cock. Its purplish head is poking up over the top of his covering, thick and dripping with creamy pre-cum. I find myself licking at my dry lips, staring at it as he finally turns away and disappears out of sight.

I sigh, rubbing my thighs together as a quietness settles around the room. I don't know what's going on with myself lately but I feel like a god damned horny teenager all over again. My brain is constantly fixed on sexual thoughts, I can't seem to shake them away from me. I feel so needy all the time, which was so unlike me. After all, I'd always been known by others as just shy little Charlotte, the girl who never did anything questionable or improper. That is, until now.

"Come, *Lar-tee* ," Memnis speaks, interrupting my inner turmoil. I peer up at him and he flashes me a wide grin. He takes my elbow and starts to guide me back towards our nest. "Let me tend to your needs. Are you hungry? Shall I feed you?"

Even now, my imagination is conjuring ideas and scenarios on how he can 'tend to my needs', and it has nothing to do with eating food. Not even close. As much I enjoy being under his care, my body is still aching. My breasts are heavy and pert through the fabric of my top.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"I have a surprise for you," Memnis adds with eagerness. "Would you like to see them?"

Them? I lift a brow at that. With my frustration slowly fading, I simply nod and begin to follow after him.

Memnis POV

"Come, pet them. They will not harm you."

Lar-tee lingers at the edge of the cage, her uncertainty as clear as the cresting sun within the vast and endless sky. Crouching low amongst them, the *Daku* hounds swarm forward as one unit, chirping and snarling their welcome. Their sharpened quills are like mighty spears jutting from their hunching backs. Their heads turn, eyeing the *hooman* amongst their territory with interest. One of them rumbles in warning and Memnis lightly shoves at its side in a silent warning of his own.

"Have no fear." He gestures her forward again, encouraging. "I will keep you safe."

The female takes a tentative step closer, crossing into the boundaries of the cage.

“What are they?” She asks quietly and Memnis feels his chest expand with pride at her braveness.

He’d wanted to show her these precious hounds of his for quite some time and had decided that there was no better time or opportunity than the now. After considering the idea, he’d finally decided to bring her into the main holding carriage, hoping she would find some interest in the fearsome beasts - and she had not disappointed him. Even now, he could see the way her gaze lingered over each of the creatures. Curious, even if wary.

“They are Daku,” Memnis explains, taking her arm when she draws close enough to pull her into the sanctuary of his thighs. Like a barrier, he places them around either side of her tiny frame, caging her in. “They are stubborn creatures, but also very fierce and loyal.” He guides her arm out, watching as her pale clawless hand strokes against one beast's shuddering hide. His eyes linger on her for a beat with purpose before adding, “…Like Yautja warriors.”

The lips of her alien mouth spread into - what *the hoomans* called - a smile. Her teeth flash but not in aggression. She is pleased; he can tell so by the way she rubs back into him.

The hounds, three of his finest males, circle closer to her small frame. They nudge at her arms and legs, seeking her favours like excitable pups. A slithering tail lashes lightly against her chin and she emits a huff of laughter.

Memnis carefully pushes at one's rump when it starts to nibble and lick at her tiny toes.

“This one is greedy,” he nudges at it again, shaking his head in amusement. It eyes him cautiously before returning to nuzzle against the female's legs. “Stop, you cretin, you have already had a turn. Let the others play with her.”

The big one snorts before trotting a short distance away and then slumps down against the floor to rest. Its reptilian eyes miss nothing, guarding them closely.

One at a time, they all snuffle and rub against her, inciting noises of delight from her throat. Something in Memnis surges, warming. Unable to help himself, he lifts a hand and slides it into her long mane, feeling its texture against his palm. The tips of his claws trail down, sneaking against the slope of her shoulder. They scrunch up suddenly at his touch and she hisses, wriggling further against his lap. Frowning, he leans down to peer at her.

“Don’t do that!” She says with another yip of laughter. “That tickles!”

Tee-kuls ? What is this word she speaks of? Memnis has never heard of it before. Intrigued, he slides his fingers against her neck again, barely even making contact with the skin which is now dotted with bumps.

“Stop!” She squirms again as a hound licks at her chin. “Well, I can see what you mean by being stubborn!” She flashes a playful scowl over her shoulder to him. “Not to mention persistent.” She finally urges the hound away from her. “Enough. I don’t need a bath, thank you very much.”

As one, they all move away and huddle down together, seeking one another's warmth. One yawns, stretching its massive jaws wide.

Peering at them, she grows silent for a beat, before speaking again. "They all look alike," she says, sharing her thoughts. "They even have the same markings."

Memnis nods. "Yes, they share the same brooder. They are brothers also."

When one of the hounds begins to groom its companion the hooman softens against him.

"Aww, look at that… I have to admit, they are kinda cute."

Koot? Hooman words truly were so strange, he thought.

"The *Daku* are very particular," Memnis begins to explain. "They never leave one of their own behind and always hunt together. Their bonds with one another are unbreakable."

"Like you and your brothers, then?"

Memnis stills from behind me. I can feel every inch of his frame grow rigid. Frowning a little, I turn my head to try and peer back at him. His face is downcast and mysterious, I can't read it at all, although I can tell by his silence that my question has triggered something within him.

"I'm sorry. Did I say something wrong?" I try to reassure him quickly, "I didn't mean to—"

"It was not always so," he says suddenly, still refusing to look at me. His gaze is cast towards the floor as though contemplating something, lost in his own wanderings.

"Do you mean…" I begin carefully, rotating a little to face him better, "that you weren't always close to your brothers?"

He nods before bringing his focus to me. "Our *Arma* was a great hunter, but he was also blackened in spirit. Although he taught us well, he considered us worthless and incapable males."

By *he* , I assumed he meant some kind of father figure.

"There had been a time when my brothers and I did not see eye to eye," he explains. "Our *Arma* encouraged us to fight against all and everything, even against one another. It was, he'd say, the only way to ensure we carried no weakness within us."

I frown at him. "What about your mother?" When he tilts his head in confusion, I add, "you know, the female who birthed you."

He grunts in understanding. “She, along with our *Arma* , were taken by the great spirits long ago. They reside now in the higher realm of our forefather’s.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, uncertain of what to say. My chest ached for him, even though he speaks so detachedly about the whole experience. I had been lucky enough to grow up with at least one parent that had been loving and nurturing. It was sad to know he’d not had that kind of luxury.

He shrugs his large shoulders before straightening a little in pride. “She had been a great warrior too. Our *Nima* had participated in many hunts of her own, in her time, and mated with many males.”

I stare at him, drawing quiet. Um, what?... Mated with many males? My confusion begins to grow.

“Many males?” I shift my position again, almost facing him now. Clearly I’m misunderstanding something here. “So, do your kind not stay together then? As in, join together and stay as a family?”

It is Memnis’ turn to peer at me now. His head inclines even further, clearly taken aback by what I’d just said.

“No,” he states matter-of-factly, “Yautja bond and breed to create young, but we do not *keep* our females. We breed them and then leave them to rear the sucklings.”

I let that sink in for a moment as a snake of unease travels down my back. For a long heartbeat, I don’t say anything. Something heavy is sinking deep in the pit of my belly like a rock.

“So, you just… *leave them* ?” I echo his words worriedly.

Memnis nods and then adds, “the *Nima* will wean her young and should any of them be male, we may return for them and take them from her. Should they be worthy, in time, they will be trained into skilled hunters. Like us.”

I swallow the dryness in my throat and slowly start to rise from Memnis’ lap. One of the hounds lifts its head but then plops it down again with disinterest. With the heat from Memnis’ body gone from me, I give a shiver, suddenly swarmed with anxiety. The more I try to force the thoughts away, the more they keep flying back to me, assaulting me from all angles.

Breeding , they’d called it, even when it had been with me. All this time I had wondered why I was here and why they had taken me. Unlike the other humans, I had been spared of their violence, even favoured. I’d assumed it was because… well, I wasn’t entirely sure. But Memnis had clearly just said that they only interacted with females to basically fuck them. They bred with them and then left them to fend for themselves. Alone. They abandoned them and then eventually took away their young. Even more worrying was the way he’d spoken so calmly about it all. So unfeeling. Which then led me to one final question…

Where did I fit within all of this?

Something inside of me is coiling tight, pained, though I'm not sure why.

Memnis rises and moves as if to step towards me. I edge back a step, finding it difficult to look at him.

" *Lar-tee* ?" He trills, clearly disturbed by my reaction. He holds out his massive arms, urging me to him. He emits a purr as if to calm me, but this time it's not helpful or soothing at all. "What is this? I can sense your distress."

"It's nothing," I mutter, more to myself than to him. I lift my arms, cuddling them around my midriff for comfort.

What was I to them? The question kept circling through me, over and over. Why did I even care? I'd thought I was beginning to understand their ways, but I didn't understand a single thing. Not really. My future, as always, was uncertain.

"Come." Memnis gestures for me to go to him, his tone firming. "Return to me. Let us find some food and--"

He starts to stride forward with purpose and something in me snaps. The idea of him touching me is almost unbearable. I don't want to eat. I don't want anything from him. From any of them. Something within me is churning poisonously. My stomach knots and I whirl, rushing for the doorway behind me. I hear Memnis call my name again, but it falls upon deaf ears. I can barely hear him through the turmoil of my own inner thoughts. Without stopping, I practically stumble my way out into the corridor and begin to head towards the main deck.

I have no idea what I'm doing. All I know is that instinct and necessity is driving me closer towards the deck with determined strides.

I needed some answers. And I wanted them now.

Chapter 16

I hear Memnis call for me again. His voice comes from close behind me, stalking my every step down the long stretch of the steel corridor. My feet clang against the vented flooring as I head left and then storm my way onto the main deck. The door slides wide, bidding me entry. I draw to an abrupt halt at the centre of the area as my eyes quickly find two huge figures stood before one of the control stations. I inhale a breath as both Sin'Chila and Yaknaur turn to me, noticing my presence. For a long moment, I simply stand there. Absently, I note that they're fully donned in their hunting gear; their blackened armour covers their giant frames, making them look even more intimidating and larger than usual. One is holding a spear in his claw-like hands, the other his helmet. Across the space, glittering inhuman eyes glow at me from sunken sockets and my limbs trembles under their silent but darkening appraisal.

And I certainly *was* trembling. My entire body was crippled with it. So many emotions were running through me like a rip-tide, unpleasant and drowning me in their depths. I didn't know where one began and another ended.

"What is this?" Sin'Chila asks, inclining his head towards Memnis who quietly appears within the doorway behind me.

My hands clench tightly at my sides. I wanted to know. I wanted to know if what Memnis had said was true.

Why do you even care? I shove the thought aside stubbornly.

Sin'Chila begins to speak to his younger sibling. "You were told to stay in the—"

"Why do you keep me here?" I blurt it out, cutting him off with such sharpness that my voice echoes like a slap around the room.

Sin'Chila cocks a mottled brow, flaring his jaws with wry amusement. "What foolishness is this?"

I tighten my fists further, trying to keep a grip on the turmoil that's now bubbling its way to the surface. I cling to it like a lost a child, relying on it to keep me steady when all I want to do hide in a corner somewhere.

"Just answer the question," I say with more bite than intended.

All humour in Sin'Chila's expression dies instantly. The ropey locks of his mane sway across his shoulders as he inclines his head further. With purpose, he places the bulk of his helmet down upon the station behind him and then returns his focus to me.

"You are here…" he states slowly with meaningful precision, "…because we will it to be so."

“You’re evading the question,” I reply, somewhat clipped. “And I’m afraid it’s not good enough. So, let’s try this one instead...” I steady myself before speaking again. “What am I to you? You took me away from the other humans, yet I’m not entirely sure as to why. What do you want from me?”

Their silence is deafening and none of them are offering me a reply.

Frustrated, I push further. “You took me for a reason. So I need to know… When that purpose is done – when you have grown tired and no longer have a use for me – what will happen next?”

They share a long look between themselves.

Yaknaur utters a low chuckle, before echoing, “grow *tired* with you*?”*

I slide my attention to him, narrowing my eyes at his mocking tone. “Yes, exactly.” It flies from my mouth without pause. “You know, like when you've had enough of *fucking* and *breeding* me. Do you intend to abandon me?”

Abandon. As soon as I say that single word, all of my insecurities come crashing down around me. That’s it. That was the problem here. I’d been let down so many times by various people in my life, even by Jason, whom I had trusted above all others. I should have been used to it by now, but if that was what they had in mind for the future then I wanted to know. They owed that much to me at least. I’d never asked to be taken and brought here - they’d decided that fate for me.

“I mean, that’s what you guys do, right?” I shrug and then turn to Memnis who is as still as a tomb. I lift my arm and point to him. “You said so yourself; you don’t keep females. You have no loyalty to them. You just impregnate and then leave them to fend and take care of themselves. And then the next male comes along and does the same; which can I point out is a huge ‘no’ from me.”

In more ways than one too. If that was their purpose for me then there was going to be some major problems. I wouldn’t settle for any of it. I wouldn’t allow myself to be used like that. Never. More importantly, what they wanted from me was impossible, for I had a secret. My own personal demon to carry…

I couldn’t have children.

Children were not an option for me and never could be. For years, I’d dreamt of possibly having a family of my own. And then – as if life couldn’t have been more unfair - I was told one day by my doctor that I was infertile and would probably never conceive a baby of my own. They’d blamed it on many things at the time; my physical disability, stress, potential unknown conditions etc. But my future was set then. I’d refused to tell anyone about it, not even Jason.

So, if this was what these aliens wanted from me then they would only be disappointed, which in turn placed me into a position of complete hopelessness. If I had no use to them then they would surely have no need to keep me around. But then again, even if I had been

able to give them what they'd needed then they would have left me anyway; as was their way. Right? So either way, I would've ended up with nothing but heartache and pain, yet again.

"I am so done with this," I rasp quietly, blinking back the tears now forming at the corners of my vision.

"You do not understand." Memnis begins carefully, edging forward with arms askew as if trying to appear harmless.

"Don't I?" I attempt to glare at him. "It seems like you've painted a pretty clear picture to me."

"Yautja males do not keep their females, *hooman*," Sin'Chila speaks up then and I turn my head to find him stalking a step towards me. "That is not our way."

His broad shape is tense, bowed slightly, as his eyes burn into me. Something in me stirs at the sight of them; both beautiful and deadly. He's probably finding my direct way of questioning them as challenging or disrespectful. His face is lowered, causing shadows to dance and play around the ghastly plains of his alien face.

"We Yautja are proud," he says firmly, "our females are even more so. They may be willing to breed with a male, but should one try to force her into submission they would swiftly lose their head for their folly."

"I…" Wait. What? I frown and take a moment to absorb what he'd just said.

"It is *they* who decide which male to mate with," Sin'Chila adds. "They rear their sucklings alone because they *choose* to do so; they do not tie themselves to anyone. They do not need our protection, nor do they need help in defending that which is theirs."

"But..." I stammer for a moment, glancing to Memnis briefly. "You take their children from them. Memnis had said--"

"We take only sons who have the potential to become hunters. Any females remain with their *Nima* and her clans."

I nod, unable to do little else. Like a stone dropping into a bottomless sea, it begins to sink in, slowly. So the two genders lived separately to one another then? Like elephants? And Yautja women didn't need protecting because they were fully capable of taking care of themselves. They hunted. They fought. They provided. Nothing was forced onto them and they certainly were not helpless. Thinking about it now, Croydon had even said the same thing once…

"The females, though rare, are even more dangerous, and twice as big too. I doubt you'll ever find one here. But if you do, run like hell."

Oh, crap.

I meet Sin'Chila's gaze and almost crumble under its intensity as he says, "it is a great honour for any offspring to be taken and raised into a prized hunter."

Mortification hits me hard like a slap to the face and my cheeks burn with it. I lift a hand to rub at my brow, dumbstruck with my own stupidity. I had totally misunderstood a huge amount here. I'd assumed too much and taken most of what Memnis had said out of context without asking questions first. Any anger I'd been feeling swiftly dies right there with my shaky exhale of breath.

God, I'm such a moron.

“Oh.” It’s all I can manage to say. I shift on my feet, squirming under each of their disapproving scowls. I dearly wished for a vortex to appear in the floor under my feet, to suck me into it to save me from this whole shitpile of a situation.

Why had I even mentioned any of this to begin with? I should have just kept my mouth shut.

Fighting back a groan, I meet their stares one by one. First Memnis, then Yaknaur, and then finally Sin'Chila. The latter’s expression is a thunderous mask. There is something there, shifting in the depths of his blazing eyes. Something dark. A simmering threat.

“I'm...” *Sorry.* The apology is right there on the edge of my tongue, but before I can finish it Sin'Chila cuts in sharply.

“So, you crave to be claimed by us then, female?”

Erm...what?

I still and gawp at him. My mouth moves like a fish, opening and closing, trying to find the ability to answer him. “I... what-- No, that's not what I'm trying to say here. Not at all!”

I didn’t want that. That’s not why I had brought the subject up… Right?

The air around me sizzles, electrified with some unknown tension. I can practically taste it upon my tongue, feel it across my skin like a caress. A pin could have dropped right then and it would have sounded like fog horn blaring aloud for all to hear it.

A low chorus of growls roll around me and I jerk my head up, rearing back a step to see that all three hunters have moved closer to me. Their huge frames are straining, expanding before my very eyes. I’d seen this sort of behaviour in them before; the lethal eagerness of when they had targeted prey and were about to move in for the kill. Predatory.

I inch further away and lift my arms as though the gesture alone could ward them back. “Hang on a minute, not so fast. Let me explain something. Humans do things differently when it comes to choosing a partner. We’re not like you at all. You see, we do this thing called marriage. It's where we choose to devote ourselves entirely to another person. Like a blood oath. Kinda.” I continue to ramble, retreating closer towards the door as a shiver skates down my spine.

If they're paying any attention to what I'm saying I can't tell. Without pause, they continue to prowl across the shortening space towards me with slow purpose. They’re closing in around me now from all sides and I feel like I’m being swallowed up by them, smothered within the

semi-circle of their powerful bodies. The noises they are making are doing strange things to my senses. Heat is pooling down my torso, within my belly, slipping lower into the V between my thighs. Deliciously warm.

"*Submit to us."* Sin'Chila all but growls.

I lick at my lips, nervous and excited all at once. "But you said—"

"I said that it was the way of the Yautja," Sin'Chila retorts calmly, his trills taking on a heady purr that makes my pulse jump. "But you are not Yautja.*"*

I swallow thickly. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I'm not sure if I really wanted to know the answer to that question. My disloyal body is already responding to them. My mind is conjuring images of sharpened claws and hardened bodies pinning me down and taking me without mercy. Deep down, I want that, there was no point in denying it. No matter how much I lash out and try to keep them at bay, I cannot deny that I desire them; all three of them.

"That scent…" Memnis whines, trilling a soothing call as he slowly reaches out for me.

My thighs clamp together and I notice the dampness that is now spreading against the fabric of my panties. I'm so incredibly turned on and the way they are looking at me now is not helping at all. I needed to get control over myself. There was still so much to discuss. I needed to tell them about my inability to have kids and what that would mean for--

"I want her first," Yaknaur grinds out with a flash of his tusks.

All logic and reason dies within me in that second.

Without warning, he claws at his loincloth and tears it away from his hips as though it is nothing but mere paper. The thickened rod of his cock springs against his muscled midriff and I gasp as my eyes instantly fall to it. The tip is beading with moisture, the veins throbbing and weaving all the way down into the fullness of his heavy testicles below.

Holy mother of—that thing is like a god damned tree trunk.

The air suddenly seems too thin. I can't think clearly. My breasts are aching, the nipples beading through the fabric of my makeshift top. The need to surrender and yet flee wars within me, tearing me apart from the inside out.

"Come to us now, female," Sin'Chila purrs, offering out a gnarled paw for me to take. I stare at it, tempted and yet torn. When I remain frozen in place, he chuffs out a sound of chastisement. "It seems you have still much to learn."

"Like how to lay down and do as I'm told?" I bite back weakly. "I am not one of your Daku hounds to be trained and moulded into some kind of loyal pet."

"No, you are not…" His eyes narrow, firm with resolve. "You will be so much more than that."

I lick at my lips and rasp my reply. “No, I won’t.”

“Tell me, *hooman.* Whom do you flee from? Us?” He advances some more, almost within reaching distance. “Or yourself?”

I didn’t even know anymore. I don’t even know why I was refusing them. Every fibre of my being was crying to go to them, to simply hand myself over and let them do whatever they wanted with me, but my pride had other ideas. His long heady hiss sends goosebumps rippling across my skin and I bite back the urge to whimper.

“Submit to us.” It comes again, deep and eerily calm, refusing to be denied.

“No.”

“No?” Sin’Chila echoes. He drops to a crouch, steady and poised. His brothers do the same, emitting a round of eager calls as they prepare to move, to make their attack.

“This isn’t what I want.” The lie is heavy between us. Echoing.

Sin’Chila’s final words slice at me with both fire and ice. “We shall see.”

Yep… time to run.

With that, I spin and sprint for the door. I throw myself through it with abandon. Roars echo and the entire ship shudders with the sound of pounding feet following behind me. With little else to do, I run like my entire life depends on it as chaos is finally unleashed.

Chapter 17

This entire moment was sheer, utter madness, yet for some reason, I could not bring myself to stop running. My bare legs pump harder and my arms fly as I attempt to outrun the Yautja hunters following with swift speed behind me. I don't dare slow my pace, not even for a moment, not even to glance back over my shoulder to see how far away they were. My efforts, I knew, would surely be a waste of time. There was no escaping them. They were *made* for this; the hunt. The chase. Deep within me, I felt a thrilling need to keep going, felt the delicious fear of being prey creeping through my blood like liquid fire.

I spring left down the next turn and a hot breath breezes dangerously close against the back of my nape. The metal door I approach starts to slide open and I squeeze myself through, not even bothering to wait for it to finish widening. I pull to a stop and peer around the area with wide eyes. The small storage room is filled with various boxes and crates and a large cage sits in one corner abandoned. Sucking in much-needed air, I curse under my breath, realising my error. I'd taken the wrong turning; this was not where I had intended to go at all. And now there was only one way out of the room; the way I had come, via the door behind me.

I turn to it, half expecting to see three large figures already standing right there, waiting. But no one is there. The area is empty except for myself. I am alone… Or so it seems.

As I move towards the doorway to dash back through it, it suddenly slams shut directly in front of my face. Heart leaping, I jerk backwards, almost falling over my own feet in the process. The silence that follows is deafening. A gust of air - a whisper of movement - slices against my side and I spin to face… what exactly?

I frown into the empty gloom. Nothing is there.

My limbs tremble from exertion and adrenaline. I peer this way and that, trying to find my pursuers. They're here. I can sense it. I feel their presence like a gathering storm on a horizon, surrounding me. Although I cannot see them, they're close. Something shifts to my right – a flash of movement like flickering silver – and I rotate towards it. But again, I see nothing.

"Where are you?" I whisper, more to myself than to them.

"Poor little female," a low voice chides from somewhere within the shadows directly in front of me. I recognise its owner instantly - Yaknaur. I can hear the rumbling huskiness of his excitement and my own jumps a notch in response. I blink, as though blinded, bidding my eyes to find him. A shape shimmers lightly into being, a towering mass of a hunter. He edges closer only to then disappear at the last minute, vanishing from sight like a ghost. And then it dawns…

Camouflage. They're hiding from me.

“That’s cheating,” I say, winded. I straighten up after sucking in a few cleansing breaths as a bead of sweat rolls its way down my neck.

A rumble of chuckles echoes from all directions. I wipe at my brow and try my best to steady my nerves. I’m ready to crumple to the floor, both in tiredness and submission.

“What will you do now?” Sin’Chila drawls from behind me, his tone equally as dark.

Something trails across the back of my naked knees; a soft scraping of claws. Heat curls in my belly and I lurch forward to avoid the contact.

“Stop that!” I gasp and bat my arm out as another touch sweeps its way up the hem of my thigh-length top, brushing the rounded curve of my ass.

“I can smell her fear…” Yaknaur hisses.

“… her *need*,” Memnis adds with a trill.

“She craves us.”

Oh god. I shiver at that. The atmosphere has grown so taut now that the tiny hairs on my arms are standing on end. My pulse is roaring in my ears, loud and thrumming.

“Is this not what you asked for, female?” Sin’Chila rumbles. “To be chosen. To be conquered.”

“No,” I whisper, uncertain. “That’s not what I—"

“Your tongue lies.” It’s grumbled out, eerily close and so matter-of-factly. “It speaks too much and knows so little. Even with the power of sight are you blinded by the truth of what lies before you.”

“Look,” I sigh, slumping my shoulders somewhat in defeat. “I’m sorry if I misunderstood some things, ok? I hadn’t meant to offend any of you. I was wrong and I admit I’ve made a mistake. What else do you want me to say?”

Utter silence follows my apology. I don’t even hear the slow rasping of their breaths. My face crumples, uneasy. I don’t like this at all.

“Well?” I sigh again. “Say something.”

Again, no response.

“This isn’t funny,” I admonish aloud to them even as a shard of dread pierces at my gut. Why weren’t they answering? Was this some sort of punishment for disobeying them, I wondered?

“You’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you?” I spin in a circle, seeking them out, before muttering lowly, “you’re such a bunch of assholes.”

A low hiss breathes close to the side of my ear. “Now do you see?”

I frown. See what exactly? I didn’t understand what they were trying to tell me and--

Even with the power of sight are you blinded by the truth of what lies before you.

I grow silent, considering what he’d said. I could not see them, but I knew they were there. Most importantly, despite my irrational fears, I knew deep down that they would never harm me. In all my time being here with them, they had done nothing but protect and provide for me. I would have been dead a long time ago if it hadn’t been for them. So why then did I feel so restless and anguished?

These creatures – these skilled ruthless hunters – were many things. Aliens. Killers of men. As primitive and as wild as the jungle itself. But they were also patient and heightened with self-awareness. They could end my life in a heartbeat, yet they also valued a way of living, a code of existence, that many humans seemed to lack. Discipline. Honour. And they trusted the members of their clan without a single shred of doubt or disloyalty.

And there it was… There was the lesson.

Do not rely on sight alone to show you the things that you need to see. Fear was natural, all living creatures felt it, but it also clouded your judgement. The way of the Yautja was to rely on your brothers with surety and know that they will be there when the need arises. It wasn’t about dominance or control. It was about unity. Surrendering wasn’t simply an act of obedience, but to pledge yourself to the protection of your unit. Your family… And I was now a part of that unit too.

Something inside of me turns, coming to awareness. I wasn’t afraid of them, only of what they represented. Freedom and liberation. Change. The ability to let go and be myself, without restraint or judgement. I was afraid of letting go of my past life and taking that final step into becoming someone else.

The air around me swells as a wave of musky male scents trail across my senses. Some inner urging draws my attention to my left and I lift my eyes just as a shape forms, shimmering into being. Sin’Chila straightens. His ropey mane sways a little as his glowing eyes find mine. He lifts an inhuman hand and beckons me forward without a word to go to him.

Submit to us. Join us. They were both one and the same thing to them.

They wanted me to stay. They were even willing to transgress their own ancient traditions to keep me with them.

I stare at his blackened claws, reminded of the terrible horrors he’d created with them and also of the gentleness in which they’d held and touched me. I was not Yautja and they were not human like me, but none of that mattered. I wanted this, I realised. I wanted *them*. If I were to be truly honest with myself, my old life was lost to me now and had been a long time ago. My heart was here. I was only afraid of taking that final leap towards them…

My hand lifts, hovering a mere inch or two above Sin'Chila's thickened mottled palm. I hesitate.

"Be certain," Sin'Chila urges deeply. It's a warning. Like a true male, he was offering me a choice; the power to accept or reject them. He was giving me the respect a female of his kind would have been bestowed. After this there would be no more doubts, no second chances. I had to be utterly sure. They would accept nothing less.

My hand trembles and then drops onto his. Seemingly, out of nowhere, Memnis and Yaknaur appear at either side of me, crowding in closer.

"Say it." Their leader commands. His huge paw swallows mine into its possession and I am once again shaken by how much bigger he is in comparison to my smaller self. "Speak the words. I want to hear them."

"I…" I lick at my lips, my throat somewhat dry with nerves. Finally, I nod to him. "I choose you."

"You will be ours." A rumble rolls through Yaknaur's throat as he presses himself against my side. It's not a question he's asking, but a declaration of a fact.

I nod again as warmth spears through my chest. Encouraged, I add, "and you shall be mine too."

As one, purring in union, they curl their massive bodies around me, caging me in. My neck cranes I peer from one to another. Yaknaur slides himself behind me and burrows his mandibles into my hair. He reaches for my arm and then lifts it, drawing it out in front of us like some kind of sacrificial offering. The ting of steel begin drawn causes me to flinch and I look up to find Sin'Chila has pulled a crude-looking knife from his belt. I blink and barely have time to register what is about to happen when the blades sharpened edge is pressed into the flesh of my inner forearm. I yelp, panicked, and try to pull away from them, but Yaknaur holds me steady with ease.

"Wait! W-what are you doing?"

"Be still," Yaknaur says, even as he continues to nuzzle down into me, trilling lowly.

Blood seeps from the wound as I peer at the strange design now decorating my skin. I somehow recognise it – two swirling crescent shapes with a circle locking the two together - the symbol of their clan. No sooner than it'd began, the blade was withdrawn and Sin'Chila pulls out a metal gun-like device. Pressing the lever, he sends a spray crystalline liquid onto the area. I hiss as the sting of the cut begins fades, sealing the wound until all that remains is a silvery line of a scar. I tilt my arm, watching as the light glimmers across the jagged lines, iridescent and silvery like a magical rune of some sort.

Once released, Sin'Chila reaches for my chin, lifting it until I'm meeting his luminous yellow eyes.

“Hear me,” Sin’Chila begins, unyielding with resolve. “From now on, you are *Chakria*, our most precious and true mate.” He thumps a fist to his chest and his brothers follow and do the same. “You are now one with us. With our blood, we shall serve and pledge ourselves to you. With our bodies, we shall defend all that is yours. None shall ever cause you harm, nor will they ever take you from our keeping.”

Feeling the need to say something, I say, “I accept.”

Sin’Chila nods, striking at his breast again with a proud straightening of his shoulders. “Then let it begin.”

I cock a brow, confused. Um, ok. What is he talking about? Let *what* begin? I hold back from asking anything even as Sin’Chila offers no further explanation. Instead, he steps back and his two equally large siblings press in closer around me. Memnis rubs his huge head into my neck, sliding his arms around my small waist. I can’t help but smile when I hear the pleased tone of his gentle purr. Though he has no human lips to smile at me, I can tell he’s happy. I reach an arm up and stroke at the scaly line of his mobile jaw affectionately. Yaknaur leans in against my other side, sliding a strong possessive hand up to the column of my throat, caging it within his lethal fingers. Their conjoined heat is scalding me even as I shiver in their embrace. With little resistance, I surrender to them, leaning back as roughened fingers begin to wander up and down my body. Narrow but solid hips slide and grind against mine. Strong arms hold me steady. A ragged inhale escapes my lips at their sensual attack. What had once been a moment of expressed joy was soon becoming much more heated and primitive.

Burning up, I rock back into Yaknaur, whose cock is rigid against my backside. With a growl, he yanks me nearer, drawing me to my toes with his eagerness. My hands find Memnis’ smooth ashen chest and my gingers trail around the strange spotted pattern of the skin there. I reach his stomach and it flexes under my caress. His hips jerk a little as I reach for the ties of his loincloth. I know he’s hard for me too and I want to see him. All of him. Tossing the scrap aside, his penis bobs strongly under my attentive watch. I use both of my hands to grab him, lightly at first, and then I tighten my hold when it starts to pulse heavily against my palm. My captive hisses, rearing his head as if tortured. Carefully, I stroke at him – up and down – taking particular care around the sensitive fleshy ridges lining the underside of the shaft.

“You’re so big,” I whisper to him, rubbing my thighs together to try and ease the ache forming there.

“He is primed and ready for you.” Yaknaur chuckles arrogantly against my neck, leaning over my shoulder to get a better view of what I’m doing to his brother. “Will you take him?”

I lick at my lips and nod, my eyes glued to Memnis’ fattened tip which is now seeping with droplets of creamy fluid. An idea hits me but I pause, uncertain. What would they do, I wondered, if I were to take them into my mouth? Would they allow it? I was never one for enjoying or giving oral sex to Jason; the idea of having someone’s genitals in my mouth had always sounded unappealing and very unhygienic. But now it didn’t. In fact, just the thought of doing such a thing to them made me feel somewhat… *thirsty.*

It wouldn’t take much. Both of them were so much taller than me, with the curve of my breasts barely reaching the level of their midriffs. I wouldn’t even have to kneel. All I’d need

to do is bend over a bit and… Fixated on Memnis' cock, I lean forward and slide my lips around his swollen head.

"Grekt!" Memnis shoots back with a hiss as if desperate to try and escape my attack. His snarl of surprise snags and morphs into a yelp as he thrusts forward, forcing his length further into the cavern of my wet mouth. "What does she do?"

"She is trying to eat him!" Yaknaur sounds as equally mystified and yet curious.

Encouraged, I moan around him and tilt my face so I can look up at him. One hand curls around the warmth of his balls below and the other trails up his chest, rubbing small circles in reassurance.

"Relax," I say after releasing him for a heartbeat. My tongue lashes out and licks at him teasingly. "I won't hurt you, I promise. Just let me please you."

His mandibles widen as I lower onto him again. His flesh is thick and filling my cheeks, I can barely cover even a quarter of his length. His taste is like that of the ocean; salty and fresh. Masculine. Distinctively him.

Someone grunts and the air shifts at my side. Suddenly, Yaknaur is standing before me too. His loincloth is gone, boldly displaying his huge rod with no shame right in front of my face. Impatient, he thrusts it closer to me in a silent command. I slide away from Memnis and open my mouth in open invitation. Roughly, he snags a paw into my hair and all but yanks me over him. His passionate sneer is both frightening and arousing as I peer up at him. There is nothing gentle about his movements. His hips snap towards my face and I choke as his cock shoves its way right to the back of my throat.

"Yessss," he groans, sounding more bestial than ever. His hold is like iron, refusing to release me. His shaft surges, swelling further against my tongue. "Suckle me, female. Harder."

Tears burn at my eyes at his invasion as I rear back and then bob back down onto him. My gag reflex fights against him and a trickle of saliva drips down my chin. All the while my other hand is still playing with Memnis, clenching him hard. The strange wet noises we're making as Yaknaur fucks my throat is turning me on even more.

Glurk. Glurk. Glurk. Glurk.

My own arousal is throbbing dangerously within my groin now. My breasts are heavy, the nipples scraping against the fabric of my top. My pussy is wet and craving some sort of stimulation.

I need more. I need them inside of me.

"Please," I whimper to them, needing them. "Touch me. I want you to—"

I don't have the chance to finish my sentence as suddenly I'm yanked up, right off my feet and straight into a powerful set of arms. I flail for a moment, shocked, and then wrap my legs

around Yaknaur's waist. My arms snake around his neck automatically as I meet his dark expression head-on. He splays his jaws wide, aggressive and feral with hunger.

"I can smell your arousal, female," he trills. "Your snat is hungry, is it not? Come now, shall we feed it?"

He gropes the cheeks of my ass and spreads them. Something nudges itself between the folds of my slit; his cock. I suck in a breath as he surges forward and pushes himself inside. My flesh gives way easily, slickened with my wetness. I clamp down with a whine as he feeds me his flesh, inch by delicious inch.

"Oh god. Yes, right there," I moan as he lifts me and drives me back down further over his dick.

I am being stretched to the max, barely able to take even half of him. Even though they've already taken me before my body struggles to adjust to his size. My panting breaths increase to the point of almost panic. He's going to split me in half!

"Such a greedy little thing you are." Yaknaur hums, thrusting further, steadily gaining in pace.

I hold onto him for dear life, relying on his mammoth strength to guide me over him. Sharp fiery pleasure is building in my core, climbing higher and higher. A hand slips under me and delves to the junction of my sex. I cry out as roughened claws trail over my tight anus and then forward to stroke against where Yaknaur is gliding his way into me. I look back over my shoulder and find Memnis there. His free hand is stroking at himself jaggedly, rushed with his own growing need. His beady bright eyes delve into me, sharp and with a hint of pleading.

"Memnis." I say his name like a reverent prayer, needing him too. I reach back, my arm straining as I try to encourage him to come closer.

Doing as bid, he presses firmly against my back, sandwiching me between the two of them. I sigh in bliss. There is something about their scents and the way their huge bodies pin me between them that sends my hormones reeling. It's so good, so right.

"My Chakria," Memnis utters, grinding against my ass with a purr.

His cock joins Yaknaurs against my slit. For a moment, they rub into me, almost as if fighting over who gets to slide into me next. Yaknaur withdraws and I bite back a complaint at how empty I suddenly feel. Memnis soon takes his place. Without a single word of warning, he drives into me. The walls of my pussy suction around him in welcome, milking him. Thrusting a few times, he offers me a sample of what is to come, before fully sliding out again.

I whine low in my throat. "What are you guys doing? For fuck sake, stop teasi- Oh fuck!"

Yaknaur plunges back into me from the front, sinking in deep like a dagger into a sheath. I arch and writhe as he pounds into me hard, without mercy. The wind is knocked from my lungs, driven to the edge of madness. He pulls out and Memnis is quick to take his turn. Back

and forth, back and forth, they play this little game of theirs with me. My cunt clamps down on one, then the other. My clit grinds down upon a smooth sweat-covered abdomen and out of nowhere my climax lunges at me like the crack of a whip.

“Ahhh!”

Back bowing, I slam back against Memnis as I splinter and shatter into a million pieces over his brothers cock. With a roar, Yaknaur slams me down onto him one more time and then stiffens. Hot jets of his cum spill into the neck of my womb, flooding me with warmth.

“Yes. Oh, that feels so good,” I mumble against his shoulder.

I slump with a smile, still held there like a babe, weightless. Yaknaur shifts me higher, firming his embrace before slipping free from my sex. Thick creamy semen trickles down from my hole, splattering to the floor at his feet.

“Give her more, brother.” I catch him saying. “She is ready.”

Memnis takes position again and rides in with one smooth thrust. Startled, I jerk a little as my newly sensitive flesh is awakened. In and out, he ploughs into me from behind. I can’t see him but I can feel his rasping breaths against my nape. His claws dig into the skin of my hips and I start to feel the waves of a second orgasm slowly creeping in.

“Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.” I chant it over and over as I bounce between them.

Biting my lip, I peer back to Memnis with hooded eyes, letting him see what he’s doing to me. His snarl – usually controlled and light – turns almost savage as he fucks me harder. With an intense expression, he sinks his tusks into my shoulder, not breaking the skin, but firmly enough to cause a dull pain. I yelp and then groan as we both slam into our peaks at the same time. My cry echoes loudly throughout the room as I shudder. My pussy spasms uncontrollably around the cock that is now jerking and emptying itself. He’s ejaculating so much that my entire pelvic area feels swollen and bloated. Some of it leaks out from our joined bodies as he holds himself there, reluctant to leave my warmth.

Eventually, he does, and I merely hang there, exhausted and yet sated. Every muscle in my being is sore, but I’ve never felt so alive in my entire life. I feel so raw. So used and dirtied; enough to put a porn star to shame. Slut – that’s what they would have called me back on earth, but I didn’t care. I’d loved every minute of it.

Winded, I realise belatedly that Yaknaur has lowered me down onto my back against the cool floor. I stare up at him and Memnis as they kneel over me. They’re both trilling at me and I slowly offer them a shy smile. One of them nods and then, as one, they back away.

I quirk a brow. Lifting my heavy head, I finally notice the third member of their unit standing a short distance away. Towering tall, Sin’Chila’s eyes blaze at me from across the space. Hungry, predatory and yet proud. His mandibles spread wide into a hiss as he prowls forward to stand over me. His mountainous form makes me feel tiny, like a rabbit beneath a lion, but there is no violence in his expression; at least not of the life-threatening sort. His loincloth is gone now, leaving only the jutting pole of his cock on display for me to behold. The tip is

seeping with his cream, the purpling head throbbing under my watchful gaze. The veins around it ebb and glow, snagging my attention and I lick at my lips with interest.

Chest widening, he displays himself, letting me have a moment to trail my eyes over every inch of his masculine shape. His bulging muscles. The ripped plains of his torso. The enormous powerful trunks of his thighs flex, easily the same width as my waist, perhaps more.

With nothing more to say or do, I lay back against the ground and lift my arms, reaching for him. An invitation. A plea.

“Sin’Chila, come.” I start to spread my thighs, showing him my glistening slit. “Please, come to me.”

Chapter 18

Unhurried, Sin'Chila lowers himself over me. Kneeling, he stares down at my sex, open and bared for him. It pleases him to see me so vulnerable beneath him, that much I can tell. Every one of my muscles tightens and trembles with excitement. His harsh breathing and scorching gaze are enough to send my pulse racing all over again. Swallowing back the dryness in my throat, I settle under his massive weight. His brothers perch either side of me, watching and waiting with keen interest.

"Such a sight," Sin'Chila purrs, lifting a mottled clawed hand to my chest. He presses it there, his command obvious: *Keep still*. At my silent acknowledgement to his wish, his roughened palm glides down the valley between my breasts and then even lower over my belly and then the V of my groin.

"So small. Fragile," he utters lowly to himself. "*Mine*."

Shifting restlessly, I arch my back as my nipples return to their painful sensitive peaks. My hand drops down, sliding between my folds to rub at the engorged bud of my clit. I circle it firmly and offer a moan as I feel myself growing wetter for him. I want him to look, to see what he's doing to me. I want him to become even more aroused, to lose control and—

His grip finds my wrist and pulls my arm away to the side, stopping my movement.

"No." He shakes his head, sending his leathery locks swaying across his shoulders. "No. Your pleasure belongs to us. We shall attend to your every whim and need from now on."

With that, he signals to his siblings and an array of large hands suddenly fall upon me. Touches rain down, groping at my aching breasts, teasing at the tips. More find my neck and shoulders, then tangle into my long hair to rub against my tingling scalp. They take liberties and leave no place unexplored, except for that throbbing place between my thighs. And I'm swiftly beginning to know why…

It was all for him now. Sin'Chila. It was his turn to take me. He would not allow them to caress me there; only he could do that. My pussy was his now.

In one smooth motion, he reaches for my legs and lifts them. Bending the knees, he pins them up into my chest until my hips and ass are curved upwards. More cum drips from my cunt from the pressure now being applied to my stomach. Breathing harder, his eyes refuse to leave mine. They're heavy with meaning and intent.

"Hold them," he says.

All I can do is nod. Sliding my arms under each knee, I keep myself splayed for his attention. My muscles burn and strain as I fight to keep still. My clitoris is pulsating now, thudding its own teasing beat in a desire to be stimulated.

Sin'Chila pauses for a heartbeat and waits as if daring me to move from my fixed position. Once pleased that I am following his orders, he bends his massive shape over me, blanketing me with his muscled body. He's absolutely huge, monstrously big, to the point of making me feel like a small doll beneath him. His firm torso brushes my chest, sending tingles through my nipples. A thick tube of dark hair dangles down against my cheek as his alien face descends closer to mine. I shudder when he notches his bulbous tip against my swollen entrance, ready to take the plunge into my molten heat.

Gaze trapping mine, he latches a heavy hand around my throat. Strong and possessive.

"Say it," he growls it with a hint of sensual cruelty. "Tell me what you seek from me."

I whine and writhe, lifting my hips to rub into him. "Don't play games. You know what I need. "

He flashes his fleshy mandibles in a sneering grin. "I want to hear you say it. Give me the words."

Heat rises into my face as a wave of embarrassment hits. God, I hated it when they did this to me. What was it with them and making me beg? Sin'Chila especially seemed to get a certain enjoyment from it. I chew on my lip, already knowing deep down that I would have gotten on my knees and pleaded at their feet if I had been able to. A few years ago I would have been far too shy to ask for anything, let alone ask a guy to screw my brains out. Yet here I was, with tears prickling as my lust all but suffocated me within its depths, once again.

"Please," I whisper it haggardly.

Sin'Chila quirks a mangled brow, wanting more.

"Please, I want you to take me. Breed me. Do whatever you want. I'm yours!"

I undulate and try to rise to be closer to him, but firm hands on my shoulders and arms keep me pinned down. I glare at the other two males who are holding me captive. Damn them, they're both trilling at me, both in amusement and with growing heat.

"Traitors," I hiss to them before forcing my focus back to Sin'Chila.

With a guttural sound, he braces himself and then breaches his way through my tightened hole. I squirm even harder, my breath snagging at how big he is. My pussy incrementally swallows him up, taking him deep in one smooth thrust. Like the others, I barely manage to take even half of his length. At one point, I panic and drop my arms, setting my limbs free as I attempt to shift away from being torn by him.

"Wait!" I start with a gasp.

His unforgiving hands find my legs and shove them up again. "Keep them up," he commands, accepting no refusal.

I clasp them, automatically seeking to please him, even as a cry leaves my lips. "I… Can't."

It’s all too much. I can’t breathe. I can’t think.

Memnis bends over me then, smoothing at my hair and nuzzling into me in reassurance. “Be easy, precious one.” His tusks glide against my jawline as his heated breath billows across my sweat-covered brow. “Surrender to him. Let him have you.”

Something in me relaxes at his calming tone. I lift my eyes and they find Sin’Chila’s which are now blazing and ravenous. I stiffen at the hard purpose lurking in their depths.

Crowding closer, he all but snarls in my face. “Call out, female. Let me hear your cries.”

And like that, he lunges forward, spearing me to a deepness I had never thought possible. Pain dances and curls with shard-like pleasure through my cunt. His satisfied grunt ruins any sense of inhibition or control I have left. With little else to do, I rear my head back and wail out in ecstasy.

Sin’Chila POV

The abyss of his peak is reaching out to him. With more will than he knew he had, he reigns it back, seeking control. The hooman’s snat is clenching tight around him, driving him to insanity. Her mewls and whimpers scorch his blood with lust. He desired more of them and *would* take many more of them from her by the time their mating was done. With a curse, Sin’Chila continues to hammer into her flesh without mercy. She would fall apart for him; he would accept nothing less. Before the sun went down this day he would have her broken and submitting to them, time and time again. This he vowed.

Driving into her even deeper, he growls low in his throat. Her walls ripple around him, forcing his belly to flex and tighten with his oncoming release. His globes slap wetly against her, throbbing with the copious amount of seed he was ready to give to her. Grekt, he could breed her like this for the rest of his entire lifespan and it would not have been a waste. She was his undoing.

Slowly, a thought hits him as tenderness spears at his chest. There had once been a time when he had rejected her, refused to accept her into their world. He had denied her, considered her weak and unworthy. He had fought against himself and the will of his brothers, and all with vain purpose. Try as he might, fate could never be denied. Nothing could have prepared him for what this tiny creature would become to them. And although Yautja males could not and should not dare to consider a female as *theirs*, she did inevitably belong to him. To them. His possessiveness knew no bounds. Just the thought of her leaving them was enough to make him want to punish her, to cage her beside them until her last dying breath.

How was it that such a small helpless being could hold so much sway over them? He wondered. They were full-bloodied warriors of their people. They were supposed to be unmovable, untouchable, and yet she had managed to pierce her way through into their lives. A light. The greatest of trophies to be achieved in his lifetime. Even now, Sin'Chila knew, without a shred of doubt, that he could never be without her now. Grekt, he would have even severed off his own limbs for the warmth of her approval, to please her.

"Sin'Chila!"

Her sharp cry draws him from his wanderings. Tilting his head, he surges into her hard as her slender pale body bows beneath him, shuddering with her pleasure. Thighs trembling, he lunges over her, dragging her further under him until her knees drop to either side of her hooman skull. She utters a sound of surprise when Memnis and Yaknaur pin her in place, forcing her to ride out her pleasure all over his deeply embedded *cros*.

He would have it. All of it. From now on, he would be denied nothing from her.

Now and always.

The yelp flies unbidden from my mouth as my entire weight is pulled and placed into position. My back bows as my legs and hips are all but forced over my torso. I cringe and wriggle at the odd position. Every muscle and limb strains, burning. My neck is bent uncomfortably until I have no choice but to look up towards the massive hunter now ploughing his way into me. It's like he's trying to destroy me. Consume me. He's hovering over me in a half-crouch, bearing most of his heavy weight with ease as he takes what he needs from me. His eyes are bright, feverish. There is no gentleness in him now, only a rough demanding desperation.

Over and over, he pummels his flesh deeper, sinking hard and fast until he's practically shoving against the neck of my cervix, seeking entry. I try to roll my hips to meet him but he's just too ferocious to keep up with. All I can do is lay there and accept everything he gives to me. He shifts the angle of his hips, rising higher over my prone form, adding even more liquid heat to my already growing climax. Breathless with awe, I gasp every time his long, darkened dick slides out of my pussy. Its length glistens with my slick, the veins ebbing and glowing. Just seeing its huge size disappearing into my hole, nearly sinking all the way in, is enough to send me crazy. His balls slap wetly against my swollen vulva in a steady beat.

Thwack. Thwack. Thwack. Thwack.

"Oh my god!" I bow into him, ready to break all over again. I'm close. I need to cum.

Growling, Sin'Chila leans closer, his hot breath fanning against my already warm face.

"*Lar-tee*." He says my name – it's the first time I've ever heard him speak it– and something in me warms as my pussy clenches harder around him. "Your feeble hooman gods cannot stop me. They cannot stop this." He brushes the line of his leathery jaw against my temple, almost as if in a kiss and I shiver. "Not even the most powerful of deities can take you from us now. I will not allow it."

His possessiveness is tangible, like a thick blanket wrapping around my slender being. The hand at my throat tightens and I force my eyes back to his monstrous face. I whimper at the fire and threat staring back at me. His pace increases even more, punishing, feeding us both the thing that we need the most.

I feel him throb inside of me as a low growl crawls its way through his chest.

He's ready. He's going to cum too. I can feel it. I want it now.

"Yes!" I choke and rasp against his hold, encouraging him. "Don't stop! I'm almost ther— Aah!"

Everything spins, blackening. My eyes roll as my entire body convulses with powerful spasms. The walls of my pussy clamp down and milk at him like a fist as my nipples bead tightly. My orgasm is blinding, the strongest I've had yet. Unable to contain myself, my head thrashes as I emit an inhuman wail, the sound of it echoing.

A chorus of trills joins with it, soothing and low against my battered senses. Hard hands hold me still as I feel Sin'Chila stiffen and begin to empty himself inside of me. There is no roar from him, no loud bellow. His silence is absolute and lethal. His burning eyes consume me. Watching. Seeing everything. Missing nothing.

"Yessss," he hisses it out. "Take it. Take all that I am."

He holds himself there, buried deep, before slowly pulling out. My limbs drop, but not before a waterfall of silken cum spills its way out of my slit and down the slope of my tilted belly. It dribbles further into the valley of my breasts, hot and sticky.

"My good little female." Sin'Chila purrs from somewhere above me, but I am too lightheaded to focus on him.

Tired and disorientated, I lay there, staring up at the high ceiling above me. My breathing evens as my sweat begins to cool against my skin.

"My chakria… my mate…"

My teeth chatter as I come down from my sexual high. Vacantly, I notice that I'm being touched. Palms roam against my belly and hips. Fingers slide into my hair as another finds the folds of my soaked sex, sliding inside. I lift my heavy head with a frown to find Sin'Chila still knelt between my thighs. His heated gaze is fixated on my genitals as he scoops up some of his milky seed from my stomach and then draws his hand down to push it into my sensitive pussy. Again and again, he gathers the escaped fluid onto his fingers, slipping it between my legs with a slow pleased trill. And it is then that I notice what his other hand is

doing… It's stroking at his hardening cock. He's not done yet. In fact, if his hungry expression is anything to go by, he's ready for more.

Shocked, I try to sit up, only to guided by down the floor by the other two males either side of us.

"Hang on a minute," I say, shaking my head in disbelief. "Aren't you guys tired? Don't you think we should rest for a bit?"

My entire frame is throbbing with weariness. Surely they didn't want to go another round, did they? I didn't have any more energy left in me. All my thoughts jar to a stop as Sin'Chila lifts my hips up with determination. The swollen head of his already erect cock presses itself against my hole, preparing to slide back in again.

They've gone mad. There was no other logical explanation for it. There was no way I could carry on like this again. I was beyond exhausted. My insides felt raw and sore, almost to the point of discomfort.

Instinctively, I reach for Memnis, searching his glittering eyes beseechingly. "I can't—I don't think I can do this. Not again."

Sin'Chila shakes his head, holding me tighter as if expecting me to try and wriggle free from him. "We are not finished with you yet, female. Far from it," he trills darkly, "this is only the beginning."

"The beginning?" Shit. That didn't sound good. "But—"

Before I can say anymore, Sin'chila drives inwards, sinking himself deeply back into the warm sanctuary of my body. I groan aloud and he growls with pure satisfaction. This time he moves slowly, taking his sweet precious time. Unrushed, he rides into me, in and out, his hot cock grazing against my swollen inner walls with each deliberate thrust. Memnis and Yaknaur purr with obvious excitement as their claws find my clit and nipples, strumming and plucking, playing me like a finely tuned guitar.

"Please…"

At this point, I'm not entirely sure what I'm begging for. To stop? For more? Who knows. All I know is that, even in my lethargic state, my body is responding to them. Traitorous and greedy. My back bows as my skin ignites with heat, like a flame onto gasoline. Slumping back, I stop fighting them and myself. My mind empties until all that remains is the needy desire to please them, to give them everything they want. I was theirs now and they were mine.

Always.

Chapter 19

Munching on a berry, I sit watching them. Sin'Chila stands by one of the stations, reading the strange glowing symbols across the screen and taping something into the device strapped to his forearm. Yaknaur is sat not far away from him, sharpening the blades of his weapons, the slow methodical scraping of metal is somewhat relaxing. Both of them are oblivious to my observations and it gives me ample opportunity to take note of all the little ticks and expressive intricacies in their inhuman faces. At one point, Yaknaur becomes frustrated with something and he practically throws the curved dagger with an ominous growl. He hisses down at it, almost like an angry cat, uttering something unintelligible as if trying to insult the inanimate object at his feet. My lips curve upwards, amused, before I plop another fruit into my mouth – the damn things tasted awfully sour, but somehow I've grown used to their tartness.

"You smile." A soft but deep trill comes from beside my ear.

Straightening a little, I shift on my bottom, reminded of the fact that I'm not alone in position on the floor. Memnis is curled up behind me. We're both sat, with me seated between his muscular thighs. I'd nearly forgotten he was there; he was always so quiet and barely ever moved, like a dark statue. Silent and vigilant. The only consistent evidence of his presence was the searing heat against my spine and the strong arms now weaving their way around my waist. He draws me tighter to him, rumbling gently like a content feline.

"I'm just happy," I say to him and reach an arm up to stroke absently at the side of his monstrous jaw. The mandibles there wriggle in pleasure before the hardened tusks nip at my fingertips.

Had situations been different, the idea of putting my hand anywhere remotely near their mouths would have been terrifying. But not now. Now I knew that they would never hurt me. Especially not my Memnis. Even in their deepest lustful moments, none of them had ever hurt me or caused me pain; at least, not of the unwelcomed kind.

My mind wanders, remembering all the times they'd taken me, taken my body without mercy or restraint. Yet every time - despite their own ravenous hungers – they'd always ensured my pleasure. Never once was I denied an orgasm. In fact, they seemed to take great enjoyment from forcing them from me, even when I felt like I have nothing left to give. They always knew how to play my body, how to make me burn for them.

And, boy, they certainly made no doubt about the fact they wanted me. Every day they took me to new, more feverish heights. Sometimes multiple times. Sometimes I would even be woken from sleep to feel hands gliding over my body, waking me to a sensual assault that I could never ignore. They gave the saying 'no rest for the wicked' a whole new meaning, but I never once complained. I craved them just as much. They made me feel alive and wanted. Desired. It was easy to surrender to them. But what was so frightening was the easy way they made me become this wanton, wild thing. Like some part of me had been unleashed, turning me into nothing but an unthinking, primitive animal wanting only to be fucked.

I inhale deeply, shifting my position as I feel myself growing wet at my thoughts. Images are rushing at me, memories of what they'd done to me only a day ago.

Face planted against the leaves beneath me, my hips are lifted and open for the brutal pounding of the male mounted over me. His thick hard cock dives in, without mercy or hesitation, feeding the torturous ache that's slowly building inside my pussy.

I cry out, arching as his swollen tip nudges against the neck of my womb with each impale, sinking deeper than I ever thought possible.

"To whom do you belong to, female?" It's growled against my ear. Dark and demanding.

"You! I belong to you!" I all but shout, desperate and pleading for what was inevitably going to come.

God… had that really been me? My skin prickles and I give a shiver, causing Memnis to fold himself further around my smaller form.

"Are you cold?" The hunter asks, leaning down to nuzzle closer. His leathery chin nudges the side of my head, seeking my attention.

I snap to and huff a laugh before tilting my head up to smile at him. "No, I'm all right. Don't worry."

"Come," he says, "let me warm you, my female."

Not accepting my answer, Memnis slides me even closer to him, practically moulding our bodies together like we're attached. My bottom wriggles into the V of his groin and the bulge of his sex begins to harden.

"I said I'm fine!" I outright giggle at him. Jesus, talk about clingy. I've never known a guy – human or alien – who appreciated closeness as much as this Yautja. It was quite bizarre, yet endearing.

His pleased purr tells me he doesn't give a damn about any of it. He's quite content and enjoying his time with me, and something in me warms with tenderness.

"You worry too much," I admonish gently, nudging at his ribs playfully.

He grunts in disagreement. "Impossible. It is a great honour for me to tend to you. Now come, eat some of the food I have brought for you." He lifts a strange chunk of brown stuff that ironically looks like tree bark.

When he tries to feed it to me, I lean away and scrunch up my face.

"What the hell is that?" I ask with an obvious hint of disgust.

He inches it towards my lips again, insistent. "It is the dried shell of a *Julin* pod."

I nod, but I have no idea what he's talking about.

“They are rarely found but they are good for the digestive system and fertility.”

I wince at that. *Fertility* . Um… yeah. Mines pretty much non-existent. Good luck with that one. My mood sours for a moment and Memnis takes the opportunity to shove the chunk of pod into my mouth.

I sigh and accept it without complaint, saying nothing. I start chewing, expecting it to be revolting, but find that tastes eerily like cinnamon, if a little spicy.

“There…happy now?” I say with some sarcasm. When he tries to feed me another piece, I turn my head away and quickly attempt to distract him. “Aren’t you going to eat some?”

“No,” Memnis says. “I have had my fill, the rest is for you.”

I roll my eyes discreetly. *Yay for me.* Of course, the three of them always woke and ate early, practically at the break of dawn, like it had some kind of significance to them. Now that I came to think of it, they didn’t require much sleep at all. Only a few hours, sometimes not even that. However, they never forced me from our bed, they always allowed me to lay in – something I was immensely thankful for. A tired Charlotte was an unhappy Charlotte. I was only glad that—

A huge hand latches fast onto my arm and lifts it. I jolt, surprised by the sudden motion. Memnis tenses and I hear him suck in a hiss.

“What is this?”

I frown and look down, seeing nothing at first. His clawed thumb brushes against the underside of my forearm as he tilts it, even more, to look at it. And then I see them…

Bruises mark the flesh there, light and purple, and eerily shaped like large finger imprints.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I reply with a shrug, unconcerned. They don’t look too bad and they don’t even feel painful when Memnis prods them gently. “I don’t—Hey!”

I’m whipped around suddenly, my entire weight moved until I’m turned to face his scowling features. His beady, bright eyes trail over me, assessing each inch of me carefully. He stops at the junction of my thighs and I notice there are some discoloured markings there as well, and then even more on my left hip too. Larger. Darker. Without care, he yanks up my scraggy shirt and peers at my naked torso beneath. My nipples pebble, from shock and the cold air. He’s oblivious to them though; so consumed by his search, he doesn’t even so much as blink.

His jaws splay wide in agitation. Something in his countenance shifts with displeasure. He’s angry, that much I can tell, but it doesn’t seem to be aimed at me.

“Memnis?” I speak his name quietly, growing uncomfortable under his perusal. “It’s fine, I am not in any pain. I‘m sure they’ll go away eventually.”

I wanted to reassure him, to tell him that I’d probably been clumsy at some point and bump into something, but I know it would have been a lie. I know where they’d come from, and so

did he. They had caused them; they must have. And probably during one of our frantic sex sessions, no doubt.

My hunter dips his head and I see an emotion flicker across his furrowed brows. The gnarled skin there tightens, as do the carved slopes of his cheekbones. His gaze lowers and my insides twist.

I reach for him, stroking at his smooth bare chest.

“Please...” I’m sure of what to say to him. “Don’t look so sad. I don’t like it when you’re—”

He doesn’t even let me finish. As if burnt, he leaps away from me suddenly, rising to his feet. I jerk, startled and stare up at him in surprise, mouth agape. He says nothing and swiftly turns around and strides over towards his brothers. They lift their heads at his stormy approach. All three of them crowd in close, their conversation clipped and rising in volume with each passing second. They all turn to me, their unhappiness clear.

Yaknaur heads to me first, his webbed heavy feet pounding until they draw to a stop right in front of my knelt position.

“Show me,” he snarls, his fury bright in his eyes.

Uncertain, I lift my arm, showing one of the bruises. Worry nudges at me. I don’t understand what has gotten them all so upset. So what? I have a few injuries. It’s not like I’m going to die. What was the problem?

Yaknaur hisses and rears back. Sin’Chila takes his place, peering down in a need to see the proof of it for himself. He tilts his head and then shakes it with a low growl.

“Why did you not tell us you were wounded?” There’s a hint of accusation in his tone.

I swallow thickly, my anxiety growing. I shrug, uncertain of how to respond.

“I didn’t even know they were there until Memnis pointed them out.”

Yaknaur lunges over me then and I feel myself stiffen. His clawed hand reaches out, the pointed tip nearly grazing against a particularly purple patch across my upper thigh. Instead of making contact, it hovers there for a heartbeat and then lowers away. A low sound emits from his throat.

“We have done this.” His words are so quiet I almost don’t hear them.

I lift a hand to caress his face, but he backs away, causing a fierce pain to form in my breast.

“Yaknaur?” I speak his name quietly.

He spins away so fiercely that the beads in his mane clatter against one another. Without a sound, he walks away from us with powerful steps. The muscles of his back bunch and roll with his growing agitation. I want to call him back to me, but before I can utter a syllable, Sin’Chila speaks.

“You will wait here.” It’s a command and I know instantly that it’s one I should not ignore.

Both he and Memnis turn and follow after their brother, leaving me alone and confused.

I blink, watching them go. What the hell is happening here? I am so perplexed. Part of me wants to follow them, but Sin’Chila’s hard warning keeps me grounded to the spot. Anyone with a brain cell knew not to test him when he got into these types of moods.

Whatever the problem was, I only hoped they would come around and sort it out soon.

Memnis POV

They had harmed their Chakria; the worst kind of wrong that a male could do towards his chosen female. Neither of them had expected this. Already, the seed of something dark and painful was spearing its way through Memnis’ being.

“What are we to do?” He asks the question aloud to his older kin, who are silent and still beside him.

Sin’Chila lowers his head, deep in thought as he stares at the ground. Troubled. Yaknaur is equally as quiet, looking out to a distant place beyond the line of trees around them.

“This cannot continue,” Sin’Chila responds with resolve. “We must be more… *careful.”* He speaks the word as though it is a foreign thing.

Memnis nods in agreement. Flexing his broad shoulders, he sighs. They slump again when Yaknaur decides to finally speak.

“Our *Arma* had been right,” he utters, not once looking their way. There is a certain tension in him; one Memnis had not seen for many moons, not since they had been younglings. “We are useless males. *Sturgesks.* Weak, *”* He spits the word. “We do not deserve to have a female of our own. We should not have allowed her to stay.”

Snarling in anger, Memnis steps towards him. “Do not speak in such a way. That is not true! *Lar-tee* belongs here, with us! The great spirits have deemed us worthy. You cannot deny it, brother.”

Chest expanding in threat, Yaknaur lunges back, his jaws flaring in challenge. “She is a *hooman* , and they are a small and fragile race. They do not belong with our kind!”

“You wish to release her?” Memnis asks coolly, voicing his worst fears.

As expected, his brother retreats, his gnarled brow dipping in disturbance of the idea. He shakes his head vehemently. “Never! I would *never* allow that.”

“She is not going anywhere,” their eldest cuts in sharply, giving them both a warning look each. Sin’Chila lifts his hand and observes it, flexing his deadly talons. “We made it our vow to protect our *hooman* … and so, we shall strive to honour that oath. From now on, we shall proceed with caution.” A long pause echoes between them before he finally adds, “no one is to touch her until her body is healed.” He flashes Yaknaur a pointed glance. “That includes breeding also. Understood? Anyone who so much as causes the slightest whimper from her lips will answer to me. Is that clear?”

The tension rises and nobody moves. Yaknaur glances to Memnis, who slumps in defeat. If this was the way it had to be done, he thought, then so be it; for the care of their Chakria. The thought of not being able to lay with their female was hellish. He wasn’t even sure he could achieve such a task. And by the darkened look of Yaknaur’s scowl, he was clearly thinking the same thing too. None of them wanted this.

Memnis, finally, reluctantly, nods. Sin’Chila joins in agreement. Their third, largest brother hesitates, uttering a growl before finally bowing his head as well.

It would be done.

Ok, now I really was starting to get pissed off. What were they playing at? I seriously wanted to grab one of them around the throat and demand them to give me an answer. The rest of my day, I’d spent pretty much by myself, alone. All three of them had been avoiding me as if I were some kind of plague. And fuck me, did it hurt. I’d sat there earlier on, waiting for one of them to return to me on the deck. It had been Memnis who had come back, but he’d only given me a strange bunch of leaves to eat – for relieving pain and inflammation apparently – and then he’d left again without so much as a word. Which was odd. Very, very odd, indeed.

My surprise had morphed into irritation, and then anger, and then sadness. Why were they doing this? There had to be a reason. Was it because of the bruises? I couldn’t help ponder it. But then why would that bother *them* ? They were Yautja warriors; injury was a weakness. Even if one of them had had a severed limb they would have probably ignored it like it was nothing worthy of concern.

At first, I’d tried to stalk them everywhere they went. On the deck. In the storage area. The changing units. The weaponry room. None of them spoke to me, nor did they even look in my direction. It made me feel like an unwanted child. Abandoned and confused. In the end, they’d all ventured out of the ship, probably to hunt or gather more food – putting me in a position of staying alone on the ship by myself.

What a bunch of assholes , I grumble inwardly to myself. I didn’t deserve this coldness from them, this complete and utter disregard of my presence as if I didn’t even exist.

Miserable, I head towards the nesting room and plop down amongst the piles of soft leaves at the centre of the pit. Their scents rise and swarm around me, only adding to my turmoil even more. The room is eerie quite. Uncomfortably so. It hits me then of how much I hated being by myself. Before, back on earth, I would have revelled in solitude. But now, after spending so much time with them, I craved their attention. I wanted them with me, all the time. Right now. They were all I had.

I huff and flop down to lay back across the mossy bed. The dark ceiling above me is as bleak and as bland as my mood.

So was this it then? Was I to just sit here all day, by myself and wait for them to come back? Was I that easy to discard and put aside like a child did a doll they'd outgrown? Another thought hits me then and I try to reign in the panic it brings.

What if they've grown bored with me? What if they'd taken what they wanted and didn't need me anymore? The idea of it was unbearable. I clench my eyes tight and shake my head. I shouldn't think like that, but there it was.

So lost in my thoughts, I'm not aware of time passing by. At some point, my eyes close and I don't realise I've drifted off until they snap open to near-complete darkness. The light in the room has dimmed and I hear something breathing lowly beside me.

I snap my head up, blinking into the gloom, only to find three hulking shapes laid either side of me. Yaknaur is to my right. Sin'Chila at my feet. Memnis is on my other side and the only one within reach, all the others are turned away from me and fast asleep. Their heavy but steady breaths fill the room and for some reason my stomach knots.

Usually, when in the nest, we would lay close together and share body heat. There was never a time when they hadn't wanted to be close to me; until now. Even Memnis – my gaze drifts to his broadened back with longing – was always one for cuddling at night time.

So what was happening, exactly? Why was I laying here all by myself? When had they even come in? I hadn't heard them return at all.

My head slams back down to the ground unhappily. I bite my bottom lip to stop it from trembling but it's no use. The tears I am fighting back come flooding into my vision and I burrow my face into my palms to stifle the sob that emerges from my throat.

God, I hate this. I hate this so much. I have the urge to lash out and beat at their backs like a kid having a tantrum.

I wipe at my running nose, sniffling lightly. Taking the initiative, I shuffle forward onto my side to get closer to Memnis' back. His heat swarms me and I lift an arm to wrap it around his chunky middle. The hardened muscles there flex and I hear his intake of breath as he awakens. I feel him jerk as though surprised and for one horrible moment I think he's about to move away from me. A shudder runs down his massive form. I press my forehead into the thick muscles between his shoulder blades, smelling him. Daringly, I place my palm against his belly and slide it down towards his groin. His cock stirs, rising so that the tip is poking up against the material of his loincloth and also the edge of my roaming fingers. I want to stroke

him. Maybe if I played him for a while he'd soften to me and things would be fine again between us?

I tease lower, seeking him out. Before I can make contact, a clawed hand latches around my wrist like a vice. Strong and insistent.

"No." The word is growled, a warning, but there is also a hint of hesitancy in its deepness.

What the… His response nearly undoes me. I jerk my arm away and roll away from him as quick as I'm able. I feel burnt by him, scalded by his rejection.

He doesn't want me touching him; the truth of it is devastating to me. But why? What have I done?

The tears return and I hear him start to rise. The leaves rustle. His large shadow drifts before my eyes as he turns and I catch the glowing brightness of his yellow eyes.

" *Lar-tee* , we—"

I don't give him the opportunity to finish. With a soft cry, I launch up from the nest and all but leap over Yaknaurs sleeping form to rush towards the doorway. My feet, though light, clatter slightly against the metal floor. My hair whips about my tearstained cheeks as I dart into the corridor beyond.

"Wait!" I hear Memnis call after me. " *Lar-tee* !"

I speed-walk down, heading for the main deck. I don't glance back, even as I sense him catching up behind me. His thudding steps cause the ground to vibrate under his heavy weight.

I don't want to look at him. I can't bear to even speak to him. I was determined to sleep in another area of the ship, I wasn't going to put up this bullshit. Fuck them. Fuck the lot of them!

"Stop!" The booming command pretty much stops me right in my tracks as if I've slammed into an invisible barrier.

I spin, finally facing him. My face is doing something, I can tell. It's showing how pissed off and upset I am, giving my emotions away like a god damned open book. I don't say a single thing, all I do is stare at him. The locks of his black tubular mane sway as he strides nearer, closing the distance between us. His hulking shape pauses a few paces away as he looks down at me with vibrant, turbulent eyes.

He's not angry, but troubled. The cave of his mouth draws wide, flashing the inside of his cheeks in growing distress.

" *Lar-tee,"* he speaks again, softer this time. "Why do you run from me?"

When I don't respond, he hunkers a down a little, bending his knees in a submissive display as though trying to appear small and unthreatening. It's almost laughable to see. He a huge

giant alien, coming towards me slowly with his arms askew as though I'm some kind of skittish mare to be tamed.

"Come to me and let us return. You must rest."

I give him a deadpanned look. "I don't need to rest." I edge forward a step, noting the way he stiffens and lowers his head. "What I need…" I start with a sniffle. "Is for you to explain to me what the hell has been going on today."

At his silence, I continue.

"You've barely spoken to me since this morning and you've all been keeping away from like I have some kind of disease." I throw my arms up in exasperation and bite out. "For fuck sake, Memnis, I can stand it! It's driving me crazy!" I then press a hand to where my heart is, trying to choose the right words in order for him to understand my plea. "I am pained, Memnis. Here." I tap my chest again for emphasis.

He whines lowly and drops his gaze. For a big guy, he looks cute doing it; which you'd think would be impossible considering how beastly his appearance is. All I want to do is bury myself against him and give him a big hug. But would he want that?

"Tell me," I say with gentle encouragement. "Is it because of the marks we'd found earlier? Is that what's been bothering you?"

I creep forward and lift a hand to his chest. I nearly smile when he doesn't move away from me this time. If anything, he seems to surrender to it, purring headily with satisfaction at the contact. He leans into me, seeking more of my touch. My thumb grazes his chest and it takes every fibre of my willpower not to go and wrap myself around him.

My neck cranes back as I meet his eyes. They're so bright and expressive, yet inhuman and wild at the same time.

"You must understand," he begins slowly, "We are not good with *caring* for things." He speaks as if he's not even sure what it means. "We are not gentle beings, my female."

"I know that." I nod to him and almost laugh. "Trust me, I do. So far, since being on this planet, I've been shot at, chased, scared half to death and tossed about like a sack of potatoes…" I trail off when I see his expression darken. "But I am still here, Memnis. I am still alive."

He doesn't seem at all convinced. As if remembering something, he leans back, drawing away from me, squaring his shoulders.

"Please," I beseech to him. "Don't do this, don't shut me out."

When I attempt to get closer, he retreats even more, determined to keep this infernal space between us.

"I cannot," he bites out resolutely. "I made a vow."

God damn them and their fucking vows and promises. Did I mean nothing to them? Did they not care that my heart was breaking with every minute that they kept themselves away from me.

“So is this it then?” I ask numbly. “No more cuddling?”

He shakes his head but doesn’t look at me. “Not until you have healed.”

I swallow thickly, choked with emotion.

“We must protect you…” he adds eerily softly. “Even from ourselves.” He finally lifts his glittering gaze to me, his mottled brow furrowing. “As our Chakria, you are too precious to risk.”

I open my mouth, ready to argue that I wasn’t a piece of delicate china to be bundled up in bubble wrap. But then I peer closer at his alien face and something in me stirs. His dark claws are clenched at his sides. For a merciless and supposedly cold-blooded hunter, he appears almost… *remorseful.*

I gasp aloud then, blinking at him as the truth of it begins to dawn. *Guilt* , I realise. It’s the first time I’d ever seen it in either of them, yet there it was, as clear as day. Not only did Memnis seem troubled by the emotion itself but also uncertain in how to deal with it.

I was no longer a prisoner to them, but something more. Something valuable. They needed me, So much so, that the thought of possibly losing me – even at their own hands - made them fearful.

For a heartbeat, I simply stood there, staring at him in awe of what I was seeing.

I take a step forward again, ready to launch at him. I needed to hold him. I needed to—

And then, I smell it. At first, light, and then growing in pungency, cloying and thick. Taken aback, I freeze. The air around us clouds with a strange mist, billowing and growing in thickness like a shroud.

Smoke. I could smell smoke.

Memnis drops, lowering with a snarl, sensing a potential threat.

“What is that?” I ask with growing panic as I inhale deeply.

A roar sounds and suddenly Yaknaur and Sin’Chila come bursting through the doorway like charging bulls. Their glowing eyes find us through the smog.

“The ship is on fire!” Sin’Chila shouts across the distance, his voice echoing like thunder. “Take the female! Go now!”

Chaos erupts then. I barely have time to register what’s happening when Memnis lunges for me, sweeping me up with ease against his chest before launching his way down one of the corridors. His footsteps clang heavily and I jolt with each motion, clinging onto him for dear

life. Shapes and colours whirl past me as we rush our way out and down the main ramp, heading towards the jungle. Heart in my throat, I peer back through the swaying locks of my hair to see the left-wing of the mountainous ship completely ablaze. I can feel its searing heat even from here and all I can do is stare up at the spectacle in horror.

I can't see Yaknaur or Sin'Chila anywhere. They hadn't followed behind us. I call out, screaming their names just as Memnis launches us into the dense foliage, ploughing us in the wilderness in a desperate bid to escape the deafening explosion that follows.

Chapter 20

We're leaping through the treetops; quite literally. My heart leaps in fright as soon as Memnis launches his huge size up into a tree. He does it with such ease and so suddenly that my insides twist and the world around me spins. His strength is phenomenally freakish, superhuman even. Like an ape he scales and hops between each one, carrying my weight effortlessly, slung over his shoulder like I'm nothing more than a small child. Leaves whip at my face as I simply hang there, my hands and legs clinging to him with all my might.

We pull to an abrupt stop and he lowers me down into a thickened alcove of branches. Sturdy, they do not bend beneath me and I relax into them, finally letting go of my hunter's shoulders. Crouched beside me, his eyes peer around. Seeking. Searching. His mane flies as he turns the other way, observing everything around him with brightened yellow eyes.

"Memnis?" I whisper to him, shaking with adrenaline. "Can you see what is happening?" I ask, knowing that his eyesight is way more acute than mine. "Where are Sin'Chila and Yaknaur?"

He sharply lifts a dark hand and I fall quiet, waiting for his next move.

We're far away from the ship now, so far away that I cannot even see a slither of smoke or flames in the distance. The atmosphere of the jungle is eerily quiet, even the wildlife are frozen under its strain.

Without a word, Memnis looks down at the device strapped across his forearm. His clawed fingers awkwardly punch something into it and crimson symbols fly across its length. Maybe to contact the others? Had they managed to make it out unharmed? And the Daku hounds? Had they escaped too? I dearly hoped they were Ok. As my mind continues to reel, I feel dread clutch at me like a vice. Unable to bear the silence anymore, I open my mouth to speak, but before I can the sound of something moving below us draws both of our attention. We stiffen and look down. I peer hard but see nothing, not even the slightest shadow.

I reach for Memnis' arm. "Could it be them?" I whisper, even lower than before. "Did they manage to follow us?"

The slow shake of his head is all the answer I need. I swallow thickly, sensing an impending threat nearby as the hair of my nape prickles.

"Stay here." It's a command, one not to be ignored.

Before I can say anything in response, Memnis' shape ripples, his body fading away until only a silvery outline remains. I can see straight through him. His thigh brushes mine as he turns in his squat and finally leaps away.

One minute his heat is comforting me and the next it's gone. He's gone. I'm alone in my hiding spot at the top of the tree. Anxiety growing, I lean back, burrowing myself deeper into the bark, hoping to remain as hidden as possible. Whatever Memnis is sensing nearby, it's clearly a danger to us. Any ground-dwelling predators would not be able to get up here, of that, I was certain of. I was safe here. Hunkering down a bit, I wait for him to return, hoping that it would be soon and we could quickly find the others.

For a long stretch of time, nothing happens. Not even the branches sway in the wind, which is unsettling, to say the least. My pulse roars in my ears as I hold my breath. Waiting. I lean forward a little, peering down at the ground below, expecting to find something.

Suddenly, a snap breaks the stillness. I start to turn my head towards its direction, but a scream emerges as a swarm of small blackened shapes stream past my body at an alarming speed. The birds shriek in alarm as they drive up from their hiding place. My arms flail as one creature manages to collide into my chin, sending me reeling backwards. Another scream comes as I feel myself falling. My hands lash out for something, anything to stop my tumble. The ground rushes up to meet me at a frightening speed. My head bangs against something hard.

"Memnis!"

The height of which I fall is deadly; it registers through my mind as soon as I started to feel gravity taking control of my body. Sheer terror snags me tight. I don't know how, but the barricade of foliage manages to catch and cushion my motion. Front first, I slam down against the floor, jarring my entire skull to the point of seeing stars.

I suck in air like its magical. With a groan, I lift my banging head and find I'm laid across the leaf-scattered ground. My arm throbs like a bitch, as does my shoulder. Blinking, I stare up towards where I'd just fallen from, astounded that I was even conscious at this point.

Holy crap, that had been close. I could have fucking broken a bone, or worse, died. Trembling, I lift a hand, running fingers through my hair.

Fucking Jesus, I nearly—

A noise comes from my right, loud and clear like a gunshot. I whip around and the bushes there begin to move, parting to give way to the thing that's now heading towards me. Slow and steady.

Was it Memnis? What if it wasn't? What if it was an animal? Just as I scoot back on my sore ass, a figure emerges and for a long terrifying moment, I simply stare at him. Dumbfounded.

"Jason?"

"Charlotte?"

Oh my god, this can't be happening. He's standing right in front me, wearing a strange camouflage outfit and carrying a rifle between his hands. His brow lifts at me, equally as surprised to see me as well.

“Thank fuck, we’ve finally found you,” he utters quietly, as if not daring to speak any louder.

I open to mouth to speak again just as two other human bodies emerge from behind him. Weapons pointed and looking in every direction, Li and another unknown man prowl forth with careful steps. Li’s gaze sweeps over me in shock as he nears. The other guy hovers at the back of their small group, assessing the area for potential threats. They’re all dressed up in that weird khaki green army clothing, their cheeks and forehead painted with black as if trying to blend in with the surrounding wilderness.

“See, I told you that she would be here somewhere,” Li says and I suddenly snap back to reality at what was happening.

It dawns then…

“You…” I stand, wobbling on my feet, my eyes narrowing at Li’s pale and nervous features. “Did you tell them I was here?”

The echoing silence that follows nearly breaks me.

Voice rising, I take an angry step towards him. “You did, didn’t you? After I saved your life, after I tried to help free you!”

Li flashes me a perplexed look. He frowns, but I can see the ghost of an emotion rippling in the depths of his dark brown eyes. *Guilt.*

“Lottie, we came back for you.” Jason moves forward then and I feel the overwhelming urge to spit right in his face. It’s still as handsome as ever, but instead of feeling love, I have the churning burn of disgust rolling through my belly. “Can’t you see? We’re trying to help you! Now, come on, we need to get going. We don’t have much time.”

Um. What?

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” I say, a mirthless laugh bubbling to the fore. Inching away, I point to them and then to me. “*This*. Whatever this is, I don’t want anything to do with it. If you’ve come to *save* me then you’re wasting your time.”

“For fuck sake.” I hear the dude at the back utter. “Shut her up, she’ll bring the whole lot of them down on us.”

“Listen, baby,” Jason adds, leaning forward to take my arm. “You’re not well. We’ve come to help you.”

“Help me?” I echo with mockery, snatching my limb away. Was this asshole for real? “You’re joking, right?”

He shakes his head, his short hair swaying across his forehead. Instead of his usual cocky self, he seems weary, almost on the verge of a breakdown. Jaw clenched, the hand on his gun tightens.

“Look, we don’t have time for this.” He glances towards the darkness of the trees warily, before dropping his volume a little. “We need to go. *Now*.”

“What part of what I just said don’t you understand?” Nervous, I start to take large steps away from them, ready to make a dive for the bushes nearby. My gaze scans the area, seeking out the blurring outline of my hunter. I want these idiots to leave, but I don’t hate them enough to want them dead. If he finds them here, he would kill them, and without mercy. But I can’t see him at all anywhere. He’s not here.

“Baby, please—”

“I am not your baby!”

I all but bellow, sending a trio of birds scattering up into the sky at its sharpness. “How dare you have the nerve to even call me that, you coward! You of all people!”

The men before me shift, growing nervous. Their heads twist and turn, eyes flickering in all directions.

“Fucking shut her up now!” The stranger says lowly. “Just grab her. Let’s go.”

At that, I spin. Mind whirling, I dart for the shadows beside me, eager to get as far away from these assholes as possible. I didn’t want to go with them. I wouldn’t. They would have to drag me by the hair if they wanted me to—

Out of nowhere, something solid strikes the base of my neck. Jarred, I drop to the floor as my legs all but turn jelly at the attack. Whining in pain, I roll over, trying to get back onto my knees. They give out from under me and I slump back to the leaves with a groan. My entire body aches.

A lone figure steps out, joining the others. My vision has blurred too much for me to visually recognise him, but I know his voice.

Croydon.

He stands over me, looking down at me with what I can only imagine is fury. Dressed in camo too, his large shape is like a mountain leaning over me.

“Dammit, can’t you guys do anything right? I told you to be quick.” His words start to slur as my brain begins to shut down, blackness licking at the edges of my vision. “They’re going to know we’re here. Let’s get a move on.”

“She was being difficult.”

One of them scoffs. “Who gives a shit. Let’s just get out here already.”

Someone moves to kneel beside me, and before I slip into consciousness, I catch Croydon’s glittering gaze. His eyes are hard and unforgiving, delving into me like I’m something disgusting.

“Should have just left her. Dumb bitch is a waste of time anyway.”

Arms scoop me up and my body surrenders and the darkness finally take over.

Memnis POV

“You should have been watching her!”

Sin’Chila’s claws slice at him, scoring deep across his face like deadly blades. His luminous blood drips into being, seeping down his jaw and chest like a river. His jaws splay wide in pain as a roar ruptures from his throat.

Knelt there, he submits to the agony, his shame burning at him like molten steel. He deserves this, he reckoned, he deserved the worst kinds of punishment for his grave error. How had he been so reckless? He had had only left her side for a short span of time, lured by the sounds of the intruders nearby, and then, when he’d returned… Lar-tee had gone. They had taken her from them, right from under their very noses. Though primitive and weak, these *hooman’s* were clever and sneaky with their tactics. He’d let his guard down; a grave mistake indeed.

“I had not meant to separate so far from her…” Memnis begins carefully, meekly. “I had not meant—"

“Useless pup! I do not want your excuses!” Sin’Chila points the end of spear down at him, his threat clear. “Your foolishness has caused this!”

First, their home had been breached, nearly destroyed, and now this.

His brothers stand over him, their disapproval as bright as the sun above their heads. The eldest is all rage and aggression, eager to spill blood; perhaps even that of his own kin. The second, Yaknaur, is silent like stone, deep in troubled thought. Nearby, his trusted Daku hounds pace and circle behind them, restless, but nonetheless, unharmed; much to his relief. Though their ship had taken substantial damage, most of it could be repaired, in time.

Whining low, Memnis lowers his head, staring at their feet in growing misery.

They had taken her ; the truth of it was devastating beyond reasoning. And it was *his* fault. He had done this. He should not have been given the honour of guarding her. He was unworthy; he could see that now.

In the distance, a loud bang resonates through the wilds. Memnis recognises it swiftly; the shot of the weapons that the *hooman’s* often used. The roar of an engine – though light across the distance – hummed into life.

They were out there somewhere, and they had their *Chakria* with them.

“Your orders?” Yaknaur asks with a straightening of his shoulders. He draws out his weapon, extending the small piece into his most prized hunting spear. With a click, the edge of the tip flares out into many blades, glinting in the light.

He’s eager for a hunt. To maim. To kill. They *all* were.

None of them would rest until their female was returned to them. Though unspoken, the pledge echoed between them with utter surety. A warrior’s oath.

“Find them,” Sin’Chila growls out. “Spare no one.”

Memnis heads for the trees, ready to launch himself into their midst’s, to stalk his prey.

“And should any harm come to the female… I will hold you responsible, *brother.”*

Sin’Chila’s last parting words are hissed, distrusting and heavy with threat. Memnis would not take his sibling's warning lightly; to do so would be to invite death. Gathering his resolve, he crouches low and then leaps into the trees, his shape dissolving under the control of his cloaking device.

He could not fail. He *would* not. Never again.

Chapter 21

My mind wakes before my body does. Groggily, noise and sensation reach me, making me aware of that I'm propped uncomfortably against something solid. A wall. Head pounding, my eyes crack open and a bombardment of sounds rush at me. I can hear people shouting to one another. The air stirs as a body hurries past my position on the cold floor. As I come to, I move my limbs, only to find that my left arm is held immobile by something. Blinking hazily, I lift my pounding head and find it trapped by a set of chunky-looking handcuffs. One loop is about my wrist, the other around one of the steel pipes curling out from the wall above my head. Strange crates and boxes sit either side of me.

A blast of wind whips at me from my left, harsh and arousing me further into the realm of the living. I slump sideways to find there is only open space a mere meters away from my legs. The gaping entrance gives way to a huge ramp that is leading down towards the jungle floor below. And then it dawns; I'm on an aircraft of some kind. Not a familiar one, I note, but not one designed by Earth either. Everything is dark steel and bleak coldness, with wires and tubes like the ceilings and walls. An Alien craft, most probably.

My hunters are nowhere to be seen.

Memories of the fire and of being found by the others fly to me then and a low groan escapes my throat.

Oh god… I mentally pray to anyone who will listen. *Please say this isn't happening*.

Through the chaos of my thoughts, my eyes find the people wandering around me. At first, I find Croydon and the blonde Russian woman, Alicia, at the base of the ramp, discussing something in heated tones. Other unknown figures are running up and down, lugging various heavy bags and sacks up into the hold. Like ants, they come and go, back and forth, completely oblivious and uncaring to my tethered shape in the corner.

"Hey, Sweetheart," a low and eerily familiar voice comes from beside me. So consumed with taking everything in, I hadn't even noticed the person crouched there nearby. "Are you Ok? How are you feeling?"

A clammy hand touched my forehead, moving a lock of my tangled hair and I rear back with a hiss like a wild animal.

"Don't touch me!"

I scuttle further into the wall, curling my knees up to my chest before looking towards my unwanted companion. Jason's eyes widen at me, both in surprise and wariness. His short hair is a striking mess around the handsomeness of his dirtied face. He holds up his hands in a gesture of harmless before leaning towards me again.

"Easy now. You're safe."

I bite back a huff of laughter as I stare at him. Safe? With him? What a joker he was. It was on the tip of my tongue to argue that he was one of the most useless men to have ever existed, but lethargy prevailed and I heaved out a sigh before rubbing at my aching temple.

“Lottie?” He speaks carefully as if I am something feral to be tamed and calmed. “We’re going home, babe. Can you believe it? We’re finally getting out of here.”

His hand inches towards my face. I pull away but can’t get far with the wall at my back. The backs of his knuckles stroke my cheek and it takes every inch of my being to not turn and attempt to bite him. I don’t want him to touch me, or anyone for that matter. He has no right to. Just the thought of it makes my stomach turn.

I stare at him as he smiles warmly at me, almost tenderly. Something in me churns. Where once I had revelled in his affections and good looks, now I felt only disgust and hatred. Yes, I hated him. Especially now as I began to realise what was happening here…

They were planning to leave… and they were going to take me with them. Willing or not.

I yank on the cuffs, drawing Jason’s focus to them. “Take these things off me. Let me go.”

“We can’t, babe,” he answers with some apologetical sadness. “Not yet. We need you to—”

A tall figure steps up behind him and my eyes fly up to the newcomer instantly, a scowl forming on my face. Li’s pale features are darkened with uncertainty, his guilt obvious as his brown eyes flicker to me and then away.

“You,” I strain forward, forcing Li to look at me again. “You did this,” I growl at him. “I can’t believe you’ve done this. After all I did to help you!” My lip trembles as fury gives way to growing despair. “I trusted you!” Tears form in my vision, but I fight them back, refusing to break in front of them.

Coming away from his task by one of the netted sacks, he steps closer to us.

“And it is for that reason that I told them where you were,” he explains quietly. His frown deepens as he appraises me from head to toe, shaking his head in disbelief. “Those creatures… How did you even manage to survive them? Your courage is remarkable.” His words are somewhat jumbled, his awkward English giving emphasis to certain syllables.

At my silence, he continues. “You risked much for me. I could have died.” His tone drops, both thankful and ashamed all at once. “Yet, I live… because of you… I had to make sure the others came back for you.”

I soften a little at that. Damn the man, I could see where he was coming from. It was the exact same reason why I had fought so hard to protect him against my hunters’ wrath. *Compassion*. He’d wanted to help and had thought he was doing so by leading the others to us. But now, they’d done unthinkable; taken me from my males and attacked our home. I couldn’t prevent myself from feeling some resentment towards him. If they had just let me be and left me there, none of this would have happened. I wanted to stay here and would fight tooth and nail to ensure that I did. I wouldn’t leave with them; I would do

everything in my power to escape them. If only I could get out these stupid fucking handcuffs…

I tug on them, testing their strength, trying to squeeze the narrow bones of my wrist out of its circle, but to no avail.

“You don’t get it,” I sigh to them both and to myself glumly. “You would never understand. How could you?”

“What is there to understand?” Someone says from a distance.

All three of us stiffen and turn our focus to the towering man now making his way towards us. In all his war-like gear, Croydon strides up to us, heavy boots thudding against the vented floor.

He stands right at my feet and glowers down at me as though I’m an impudent child. Crossing his powerful arms, he tilts and shakes his head. The white lines of the scars on his face gleam like silver under the fluorescent lighting, striking yet intimidating.

“You should be lucky we came for you at all,” he bites out with clear dislike. “If it wasn’t for Jackie-Chan and Romeo here, I probably would not have even wasted my time.”

I don’t miss his racist dig towards Li, nor do I miss the way his cold eyes seem to roam over my length, laughing silently. I glare at him, but remain quiet, refusing to bark at his mockery.

“You look like shit by the way. But It’s not surprising after spending such a long time with those *things*. It’s a wonder you’re still sane.”

I can’t believe the nonsense that’s coming out of his mouth. It wasn’t as if I’d had any control over any of this. They were the ones who had abandoned and left me to begin with. I would have been dead a long time ago if it hadn’t been for those *things* Croydon kept referring to. My Yautja’s had done nothing but protect and take care of me. What had these dogs done? Absolutely nothing. They were cowards. They were only in it for themselves, taking care of their own hides.

Jesus. I almost laugh to myself. *I was starting to sound like Yaknaur.*

“Release me.” I yank again on my cuffs. “You have no right to do this.”

Croydon huffs a low chuckle. “Oh, I don’t think so. You’re staying right there until we’re up and off of this fucking shithole of a planet.” He steps closer, placing his large feet either side of my legs before leaning down to point a thick finger in my face. “And I don’t want any trouble from you, do you hear me?”

My chin lifts a notch. “Is that a threat?” I say it with more courage than I actually felt.

He nods with a hard glint his gaze. “Why, yes. Yes, it is. Got a problem with that?”

“Dude,” Jason pipes up suddenly, his voice careful, as if not wanting to anger the other man further. “Chill out. She gets it.”

With a grunt, Croydon sneers sideways at Jason. “Does she? Do any of you?” Straightening, his jaw clenches and the whole length of his body tightens, poised and ready to explode with his barely contained fury. “I’m starting to get really tired of you assholes…” He growls out. “…and of this place. No amount of money is worth any of it. This entire situation is nothing but a messed up fucking zoo party and I’m done playing a part in it.”

That certainly got all of our attention. Li snaps his head up and Jason tilts his. My brows furrow, confused.

“What do you mean?” Jason asks before I can.

Something is coming, I can feel it deep down in my bones. He’s hiding something from us. The mistrust and wariness passing about the area is as thick and smothering as smoke.

“What?” Croydon merely shrugs his shoulders, all arrogance and indifference. “Did you think this was my first time doing this shit?... Of course, it’s not.”

Perplexed my mind wanders, weaving over the past events of my life since arriving here. Long before I’d met the hunters, we’d been following Croydon trustfully, allowing him to lead us. He’d been one of the first to find me and Jason when we’d awoken in the pods. He’d always known what to do, where to go for water and food. He knew locations and where to find them, as if…

My mouth drops open. “You’ve been here before, haven’t you?”

“What the…” Someone utters in shock nearby, but my gaze remains fixed on the huge man before me.

“I never left to begin with,” he begins to explain, calmly. “I’ve been here for years. It’s part of my job here to make sure dumb fucks like you lot get through the initial induction period and into the zone.”

Zone? Induction period? What was he talking about?

“Induction period?” Jason echoes my very thoughts, his concern clear across his face. “Wait. What? We had been told this was some kind of experiment, that we’d—”

“Yeah, well, they lied to you, kid,” Croydon cuts him off, his irritation growing further. “It’s what *they* do. They say and do whatever it takes to get you signing up.” He throws his arms up, becoming exasperated like he’s trying to explain something of importance to an ignorant bunch of children. “This isn’t an experiment. You were brought here to be guinea pigs. You are nothing but cattle to be sacrificed…” He thumbs backwards towards the open jungle below. “…To *them*.”

Oh my god . I sit there, stunned into silence for a moment.

“You’re lying,” Jason says finally, and then looks to me and Li. “He’s lying. He’s got to be.”

“Believe what you want,” Croydon replies with a shrug as if he couldn’t give a damn. “But we all know very well that this isn’t something normal. Earth and these guys have been

trading humans for ages, it's what's keeping the peace between the two races. Predators are the hunters, they thrive on killing, it's what they're born to do. So to keep them from attacking our world, we send them *toys* to play with, prey to keep them occupied…" He holds out his hands, palms upwards, gesturing towards us. "You."

The only movement I could muster was the haggard inhale of my breath. So that was it? This whole thing had been nothing more than a ruse. We had been sent here to be hunted. Willing or not. Innocent or not. No one was safe here.

"And you?" Li asks, "what is your part in this?"

"They pay me to keep you alive, to make the hunt interesting."

"This whole time…" Jason whispers, equally as shocked as I. "You've been leading us to our deaths."

Again, Croydon shrugs. "What can I say. As the saying goes; if you're good at something, don't do it for free."

I choke on air, utterly disgusted by him. "Do you have no humanity in you at all? No shame?"

Before I can finish the last syllable, his massive body lunges over me. A firm hand grabs at my jaw, demanding my attention. My eyes widen in fright, forced to stare right into his glacial ones. His arm trembles, struggling to contain his strength as he holds me tight within his grip.

"Listen, Princess. You don't understand. I'm a simple man, and money makes me extremely happy." He inclines his head towards Li and Jason. "You? Me? Us?... We're nothing but pawns to our governments' whims. They don't care what happens to any of us, nothing will ever change that." His hold tightens, his threat clear and I whimper at the pain that shoots along my cheeks. "So do me a favour and save your goodie-two-shoes comments to yourself. There's only one thing a woman's mouth should be used for, and it sure as hell 'aint to give me lip."

I move. I can't help myself. I rear back an inch and then lurch forward, sending spit from my mouth and over his nose. He lets me go and jumps up with a curse, wiping at his face like it's burning. For a terrible heartbeat, it sinks in what I'd just done, but it was too late to change it now.

Croydon's arm flies out, the back of his hand, solid and hard, smashes into the side of my face. Pain explodes through me like a firecracker. My head snaps to the side, hair flying. My ears ring and I blink through the dizziness to find droplets of crimson now dropping down to the fabric of my top. My nose is bleeding.

"Oh!"

"Holy fuck man!"

Steps jump towards us as our two companions gasp in horror.

“There was no need to hit her,” Jason argues.

I fight back a whimper and slowly lift my head to face Croydon. His glare is deadly. He looks like he wants the throttle the very life out of me, but instead of trembling, I feel an eerie stillness take me. I don’t speak a word. I don’t need to. Something dark and violent rolls through me, frightening even to myself. Because I know… deep down, I know my hunters will come for me. And soon. Inwardly, I imagine the scene of it, of the way they’ll take this poor-excuse-of-a-man’s head and use it as a trophy.

His time will come. I know it. And he will deserve it too.

“Stupid bitch,” Croydon spits. “I’m done with you.” He finally moves away and turns to the others; as some new faces have joined our little gathering and are now watching with open interest. “I want the rest of that cargo up here, asap. You’ve got ten minutes and then we’re leaving.” He claps his hands impatiently, ushering them into motion. “Come on! Get on with it! Chop chop!”

The crowd moves to follow his orders and I slump back against the wall, pleased to finally have my personal space back, yet at the same time feeling the throbbing pound of a headache emerging. I rub at my brow and groan as the room spins for a moment. My arm is beginning to go numb from being in an upward position for so long and the floor under my bare legs is freezing me to the bone.

A hand touches my shoulder and then delves into my long hair in an unpleasant caress.

“Hey,” Jason croons, “Are you Ok?”

“Get away from me!” I turn, snapping away from his contact. I don’t want him anywhere near me. His very scent and presence is offensive.

My bottom lip starts to wobble and I almost want to bellow at myself not to cry.

To my emerging horror, the engines thrum into life and their loud rumbling rattles the very walls around us. They’re preparing to take off and the realization of it is enough to nearly send me into a blind panic.

The trees below bends and bow as I scan them, looking for any sight or shadow of the Yautja.

But they’re not there.

Where are they? Please, let them come for me. I chant it over and over in my mind. *Please*.

“Jason, please,” I spin to him then, all but begging as I lean into him. “You have to let me go. Please, I don’t want to go with you guys. I need to stay here.”

He stares at me as though I’ve lost my sanity. “Let you go?” He laughs then without mirth. “What? Do you even hear what you’re saying right now? This isn’t like you at all.” He stands, moving away and a coldness sweeps over me.

“You can’t do this!” I scream, wrenching myself upwards and onto my knees. I want to launch myself at him. I want to run and leap down the ramp as if my life depends on it, but I can’t. The binding around my wrist won’t allow me to even stand up.

As thought finally seeing my despair his expression softens, turning contrite. “Look, I know I’ve made a lot of mistakes lately. But this, from you, is just too much…” He crosses his arms, annoyed. “We came back for you, Charlotte. Does that mean nothing to you?”

He says it as if I should be thankful, as though I owed him something. Well, fuck him, I didn’t owe him a single thing.

“Everyone into position.” I hear Croydon call. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

I watch, horrified, as the last member of their team rushes up and into the ship. They all start towards their seat, buckling down and preparing for take-off.

A clang sounds. The ramp starts to rise.

No. No. No. This can’t be happening. This cannot *be happening.*

“Jason,” I whisper his name, unable to do little else.

“It’s going to be Ok,” He says, patting at the top of my hair like one would a dog. “Once this is all over, things will get better. I promise. We’ll be back on Earth, where we belong and we can work things out. I won’t—”

A sickening thud sounds. A gurgling follows, coming from Jason above me. Someone – a female nearby – screams loudly, breeching the thrum of the engines. My head snaps up and my own shriek follows.

Jason’s face… I can’t recognise it anymore for the huge spear now impaling it. Its long length has slid straight through his skull, clean and precise. The pointed end has emerged through his nose area, sending thick streaks of blood spurting in all directions and over my legs.

He sways, crumpling to his knees, before falling sideways to the floor. Unmoving.

Dead.

I stare, dumbstruck. Utterly frozen.

Chaos erupts around me then as voices rise in terror.

“Holy shit! What the—"

“Get back in your seats!”

“Stay calm!”

“Get this vessel up, right now!” Croydon’s shout echoes above all the others.

A roar sounds, deafening and deadly, splitting through the atmosphere like an axe. Mind fuzzy, I slowly turn my head. The wind whips at my face as I look down to find three hulking shapes approaching upon the horizon, as fast and as swift as the wind.

A second roar follows and I recognise it instantly.

Yaknaur.

Tears spill down my cheeks in earnest now as my heart leaps, surging with manic, terrifying hope.

They're here…. They've come for me.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Memnis!" I call his name, seeing him at the front of the other two and leading the way.

His powerful legs are eating up the distance like it's nothing. His dark skin gleams, as do his eyes, glittering bright and narrowed upon my spot in the ship. I know without a doubt that his keen vision has spotted me against the wall. He's fixated, rushing forward with all his ability.

I sniffle and then strain at the metal holding me captive. It rattles and groans as I tug and pull, fighting to be free. I want nothing more than to just jump out and run straight to him.

Yaknaur stands above an incline of rocks, his body unfurling as his arm drops from having just thrown his weapon. His roar of victory at his own miraculous aim is enough to send the birds in the trees around him up into flight.

Sin'Chila follows at the rear, practically storming his way through the thickets and foliage like an elephant, pushing everything out of his path with his powerful self. His bellowing snarl is dangerous, the darkest I've ever heard it. The blaster on his shoulder rises, pointing towards our spacecraft. A thin beam of light sears out, taking aim, before sending a fiery shot out in attack.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Each one slams into our ship like a sledgehammer, blasting dents and holes into the thick metal like it is mere paper. Shouts of alarm swarm around me, sending my own panic into a whirl. At one point, a single shot jars me to the side, my arm pulling taut as I nearly fall onto my side. I twist, fighting to keep upright, curling up to try and protect myself from any potential damage. Unlike the others, they can move away and hide. I, however, am stuck here. I cannot flee or keep out of the way.

Out of nowhere, a flash of blue flares into life, surrounding the ship in its ghostly luminescent dome of light. The blast that follows next merely bounces of its mystical surface, sending only a slight shudder across the shimmering shield.

The ramp is half the way up, slowly finishing its closure and I have to rise onto my knees to still be able to see what's happening.

The ship stirs under me, gradually ascending from the ground.

With huge eyes and a thudding heart, I watch in awe as Memnis launches himself up from below us. Despite his large size and weight, his feline-line strength brings him straight up towards the underbelly of the ship. With a roar, his clawed hand finds purchase on the edge of the ramp. The metal bends under his hold. His fingers close around it for a brief, terrifying moment… before then losing purchase again and sliding away.

He falls away and out of sight.

“Memnis!” I scream for him and hear the thud of his heavy landing along with his desperate calling of my name.

“ *Lar-tee!”*

The ramp finally closes, sealing me into the gloom of the cargo bay. The three of them vanish and I am all alone, once again, with nothing but my own despair and the other retched humans in the seats in front of me.

“No.” My voice trembles as I utter the word.

Stricken. Shaken. I feel our ship begin to rise even further, lifting us into the sky and taking me along with it. Away from them.

“No! No! No!” I succumb, screaming it over and over as all my hopes die, leaving only complete devastating despair in its wake.

Sin’Chila POV

No.

How could this be?

She was gone. Their *Chakria* … Gone.

Impossible.

Still charging aimlessly, he draws to stop, tilting his head back to watch the large vessel rising higher against the dusky sky. The sun blinds him, yet he does not dare the look away. He *cannot* look away. He must not. All that he had come to treasure was on that ship, slowly drifting away from him. From them.

It grows smaller and smaller, becoming nothing more than a darkened speck amongst the distant skyline, disappearing before his very gaze.

Gone.

Breathing hard, his shoulders drop. His arms grow heavy and he lowers them, bringing the tip of his spear down towards the ground. All his strength and energy drains away. Defeated.

His brother, Yaknaur, slides to an abrupt halt at his side, panting like a beast. His haggard breaths are harsh and echoing amongst the silence as he too stares up towards the sky in dismay.

“No,” it comes out jagged. Wild and broken in the same instance. “This cannot be.”

Circling, Yaknaur spins in every direction, as though seeking out some answer amongst the wilderness around them. He snarls with unhindered fury. His head goes back, his mane flying as his roar rips through the air.

Sin’Chila’s gaze finds his youngest kin, Memnis. A short distance away, he kneels there on the mossy ground, his head bowed low. Though he does not speak, his pain is ebbing across the space to them, as open and as raw as the bleeding wound upon his hand. He clenches it, curling it tight, before bringing it up to his forehead.

“How?” Yaknaur continues to utter with restlessness. “How has this happened? How?”

Sin’Chila has no answer for him; there was none that he could offer that would provide even the smallest of consolations.

The long, terrible stretch of silence between them is like a hungry beast eating at every ounce of their spirits.

“We have failed her,” Yaknaur breathes before finally drawing into stillness.

Sin’Chila despised this… this *feeling* . This weak, disgusting attack of hopelessness; it was not what a warrior should succumb to. Yet it was there, refusing to be ignored.

Words echo to him, a reminder of the oath he had once given to his female and had now failed to complete.

“From now on, you are our most precious and true mate. One with us. With our blood, we shall serve and pledge ourselves to you. With our bodies, we shall defend all that which is yours. None shall ever cause you harm, nor will they ever take you from our keeping.”

Yes. Yaknaur was right, he thought. They had failed her.

“Brother?” Yaknaur’s voice breaks him from his wanderings. Slowly lifting his head, they meet one another’s gaze. “Your orders? What are we to do?”

What could they do? Sin’Chila pondered it carefully; every option and every possibility. This could not be the end. It *would not* be, he vowed. They were Yautja and would never give in so lightly in the face of adversary.

Squaring his shoulders, something dark begins to worm its way through his being, weaving straight to the core of his very breast, insistent and refusing to be denied.

The *hooman’s* had taken that which belonged to them, and so, it would lead only to their downfall. Every one of them would perish and he would relish every moment of it. He would move every rock and destroy every creature that blocked his path in retrieving his female.

Nodding, he stares deeply into his brother’s glittering eyes. A silent message passes between them, feeding each other’s thirst for blood and vengeance. Yaknaur slowly bows,

acknowledging his kins unspoken command, knowing his very thoughts as though they were his own.

A new hunt would begin now; their greatest and most important one yet.

“This is not the end,” Sin’Chila says quietly but with firm resolve.

As long as at least one of them drew breath, it would never be finished.

Yaknaur straightens, expanding his chest in excitement. He leans down, grabbing for his spear once again as a snarl spreads across his mandibles.

They both turn towards Memnis and Sin’Chila steps up behind his knelt form, placing a hand upon his shoulder in silent comfort. Their youngest does not move to rise with them, but it does not matter. Together, they would make repairs on their ship and give chase to take back their *Chakria* . And they would either succeed or die trying.

For now, not time, nor death, nor even expansive realm of space would keep them from their little female.

And so, it would begin…

For a long moment, I stare at the closed doorway, disbelief and dismay rolling through me like a riptide. Tears stream down my face and I can’t seem to stop them.

“No,” I choke the word out, my chin wobbling as the reality of it hits me hard. “No. Please, no.” My words morph into sobs as I draw my knees up to my chest, burying my face into them for comfort.

I cry softly, suffocated by my despair. Once again, my hunters were lost to me. They were gone. One moment, they had been there, trying to reach me and the next… just, gone. I had no idea of what would happen now. I had no plan or way of possibly returning to them.

Sniffling, I lift my head, staring around at the various people strapped in their leather padded seats in front of me. I want to scream at them, to demand that they take me back, but I know it would only fall on deaf ears. I wasn’t one of them. I was their unwilling captive. And I hated them… All of them.

“Are you Ok?” A hand falls to my shoulder and I look sideways to Li, who is now staring down at me with dark, concerned eyes. He’s shaking too, unable to stop himself from peering down at Jason’s crumpled body beside us. His blood pools across the floor like a glistening lake of red. *Dead.*

“Please,” I say, lurching away from him, even as a shard of guilt whips through me. “Don’t touch me. Just… don’t.” I cannot find the words to speak my anguish. There would be no

point in it anyway, as he'd never understand.

"I'm sorry." His quiet apology doesn't soothe me in the slightest. Instead, I bow my head as another strangled sob slides from my throat. His large hand presses to my back, rubbing in awkward circles as if trying to soothe a weeping child. "I should not have—"

"That's enough." Croydon's voice cuts in from beside us and suddenly he's there, towering over us and glaring as if I was the main source of all his misfortunes in life. "Stop coddling her. She doesn't deserve your fucking pity."

Through the locks of my hair, I scowl at him. "You're going to regret doing this," I say it, meaning it to sound like a threat, but it sounds pitiful and weak. Almost unsure.

Croydon laughs, his mouth thinning. "I doubt it, sweetheart." He crosses his massive arms. Displeased. "Whose side are you on anyway? We've been wasting time, trying to save your ass. And for what? I thought you were one of us…" He trails off, his meaning obvious.

He didn't trust me and I didn't trust him either. He considered me a lesser being now for wanting to stay. The way he was looking at me now reminded me of the way one would look at something disgusting or unpleasant, like muck on the bottom of his shoe.

The feeling was mutual.

I would never forget all the things he'd done. Whilst this whole situation wasn't entirely his fault, he'd led us on a merry chase, lying to us the entire time. He had a nerve to stand there and preach to me about integrity and being 'one of the tribe'. He was nothing more than a coward.

"You're one to talk," I say with a hiss. "I hope you burn in hell for what you've done."

He chuckles again, his eyes sharp and like ice. "Love, there's only one place I'm going, and that's back to Earth. And so are you." He crouches low, putting his huge shape in front of me as he leans in. "But don't worry. I'll be sure to let the government know about how much of a traitor you've been. You know what that means, right? You'll be considered a Judas by your fellow humans, a wanted criminal for the rest of your miserable existence."

I shift uneasily. The metal of my cuffs clang lightly, but I say nothing.

Croydon tilts his head at my silence and something in him softens, just a little. He sighs as though incredibly weary and rises to his feet again. "We could have done this differently but you wanted to be difficult, didn't you?" he shakes his head again, his resolve visibly firming across his scarred features. "Maybe next time you'll think twice about where your loyalties lie, and you can start now by enjoying a nice uncomfortable flight home in a cell rather than on deck with rest of us *civilised* folk."

I almost laugh at him. *Civilised?* Was that a joke?

Before I can speak, he turns to Li and gestures to him. "Take her away."

"But, sir…?"

Croydon snaps his fingers at him, his command clear. “Don’t question me, kid. I gave you an order, so follow it.”

Hesitant, I feel Li take my arm. The cuffs loosen and drop away as he unfastens them. His strong but gentle grip draws me unsteadily to my feet. I sway a little as my circulation corrects itself to the new position. I don’t fight him; there’s no point and nowhere to run to anyway.

Croydon spins away, but not before calling back over his shoulder. “If she loves their kind so much then who are we to deny her… put her with the other one down below and make sure she behaves herself.”

“Come,” Li urges softly, drawing me away and down a nearby narrow corridor.

My eyes follow Croydon’s back for a second, all but glaring daggers into his being like it could actually cause him damage. *Asshole.*

I follow Li through the doorway, only to then gasp as his words finally sink in.

Put her with the other one…

Wait… What?

My stomach lurches. Li’s face is a mask of unease as he leads me down the metal walkway. Our footsteps clang and echo, but all I can focus on is those fleeting but heavy words.

We drop down a set of steel steps and into what looks like a storage area. A large barred cell lines one length of the small room and my eyes instantly find the hulking monstrosity of the creature chained within it.

It dawns then.

It’s a Predator. A Yautja. They’ve got one right here on the ship with them and I don’t recognise it at all.

It’s not one of mine.

The End

…

Of part 1

Chapter End Notes

Author note: OK. So, this fic has truly gone through the roof in regards to readers, kudos and comments. I would like to take this short moment to thank you all for your unending patience and support for my writing. You're all amazing! <3 Now… I've been thinking about this for ages, trying to think of a way of ending this story. I was originally going to have Lottie return to Earth without her males as an open, non-HEA ending - which I agree, utterly sucks. Honestly, I don't want to end it just yet lol. I've kinda grown attached to my characters. So… I've decided to add a second part to it. For a while now I've been planning out all the scenes and chapters and I'm super excited to get writing them for you. I know you're going to love them! So keep a lookout for the next chapter (AKA the start of part 2) of this story. I will post them right here on this one so that nobody has to go looking for them, it will all be kept together. But in the meantime, bear with me whilst I get my ideas together. The Yautja brothers will be back, along with a new mysterious arrival and Lottie too! Sending lots of love to you all <3 and once again - thank you. Keep safe.

Chapter 23

Part 2 - The Story Continues...

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<3

This creature is not one of my hunters, I realise that as soon as I'm lightly guided into the cell with it. At first, the size of the hunters enormous back and shape had filled me with hope. My heart had leapt as my mind had instantly shot to the possibility that it was Yaknaur or Sin'Chila, but as soon as I got a good look at *him* (and it was most certainly was a male), I knew that I was in big, big trouble.

Anxious, I turn back as Li closes the cage door behind me. He slides the lock into place, flashing me an apologetic glance.

"Do not worry. It's sedate," he utters as if unsure. "It can't hurt you… You should rest." And with that he leaves, his words not offering even the slightest bit of reassurance.

The quiet thickness of the area closes in around me, and with little else to do, I return my focus to the Yautja.

The creature is enormous, even much larger than Yaknaur's intimidating size, I realise with a thick swallow of dread. Though its body is crumpled over, seemingly weakened and unconscious, it's still a giant compared to my smaller human self. I can't see much of its face as its head is lowered. Thick steel chains wind around its broad chest and chunky arms, which look as girthy as tree trunks. A thickened array scars (and so many of them) decorates its mottled reddish-brown skin in abundance; a sure sign that this hunter had had his fair share of fights and hunts. This male was formidable, that much was clear, and what I found even more startling was how different he seemed in comparison to my own three hunters.

Sure. He had the same darkened ropey locks and terrifying build. He had the same mangled expanding jaws and domed skull. The claws. The webbed feet. Everything about him screamed of Yautja, but he was also not entirely of their kind either.

A long crocodile-like tail extends from behind him, lying heavily across the floor like a sleeping snake. His hands are large, the arms threaded with veins and muscles to rival even the most hardcore of bodybuilders from our world. His overall skin is an odd colour, like burnished coppery sand, and scally too, like a lizard. All in all, he seems part Predator and part something else. A hybrid perhaps?

Its chest expands slowly in a breath, giving the indication that it is alive. I edge back a step, plastering myself into the wall behind me. Even though the cage is a fair size, this

monstrosity of a being practically swallows up all the space and there was one thing I knew for certain…

I did not know this hunter. I had no idea if it would try to attack me, or worse, kill me. Going by its size, those chains (though strong as they looked) wouldn't keep it contained should it try to break itself free. I was trapped in here with it, with no way of escaping or anyone to help.

Yep . I eye the beast and hold my breath for what feels like a lifetime, trying to appear as small and invisible as possible. I was well and truly screwed.

I just hoped desperately that whatever they were sedating it with would last until we got back to Earth and that it wouldn't wake up any time soon.

Mysterious Hunter's POV

Hate is like a blade in Darvik's belly, hot and heavy, stealing at his senses. These being's, these weaklings… *hoomans*… new not of what awaited them once he'd decide to make his move on them. By the spirits, he loathed them all. All of them were nothing but insects, and he would have his vengeance, that much he vowed.

So, they thought they could contain him, did they? First, they had come at him in their pack like wild dogs, daring to attack him in the darkness of night. Taken aback, they had managed to overwhelm him in their numbers, using their strange tricks and weapons to take him down – he, one of the strongest and most capable.

For many moons, since the beginning of his lifespan, he had never been one need the aid of others. His people had outcasted him. *Bad blood*, they had called him. He had had no brothers to rely on, no clan to call his own, and with that had come the necessity to become like stone. Immovable. A lone hunter who would always take and defend what was his. There had been very few beings that could have beaten his volatile strength…

Until now.

These pitiful beings – despite their cleverness – would learn what it meant to cross one such as he. They may cage and bind him, but being the ever-patient hunter, he knew when to bide his time, of when to make his attack. Their false sense of sureness would be their downfall, as now he was a predator lying dormant within the nest of his prey. Waiting.

In his mind, his fury seethes quietly. Which each visit they made to him, they prodded and fed him their strange medicines, seeking his submission. Little did they know of how useless their contraptions were against him. It would all be for nothing in the end. Once free, he would claim back that which was his and mutilate each of their cold corpses for his reward. Blood would be spilt, much of it, and just the idea of it sent a ripple of anticipation rippling down his powerful back.

Metal slides and the door to his prison opens. Without lifting his head, Darvik can tell the beings approaching are *hooman* simply by their stink. Both of them stank of fear and sweaty

man-flesh, but one in particular seemed… *odd.*

One of them steps into his domain and it takes every inch of his control not to roar out in fury; his territorial instincts strong. Captive or not, this space was his now and the desire to rise from his false slumber itched at him, as was the need to reach for the creature and dash its skull against the wall for its daring invasion.

Its footsteps are light and wary, its breathing growing heavy, like that of prey being hunted.

The male at the door locks the other inside and then walks away, leaving the other smaller one to its fate.

Something is strange about this one; the thought strikes him, curling at his mind. Some of his bloodthirst simmers as he waits. Listening. Hyperalert.

The creature moves away from him out of fear, that much is obvious.

Darvik's frame stiffens as he carefully inhales deeper. And then it hits him…

Yautja.

This *hooman* smells like one of his own, like a hunter. Only, it wasn't one of his kind, of that he was certain. It was far too small. Too pitiful and pale. No. Even with his limited knowledge and interactions with his own kind, he knew this thing wasn't like him. Yet is carried the scent of not only one, but many; the scent of males, both *hooman* and hunter.

Time passes, luring the being into a false sense of security that it nests into the corner, drifting into the realm of sleep. Vulnerable.

Slyly, Darvik looks up, his keen eyes sliding through the growing darkness towards the source of his current displeasure. This new intruder. He makes out a long mane of red and slender limbs, pale and smooth. Scaleless and…

Female.

Unable to stop himself, his head tilts and the foolish creature is oblivious to his movements. Through his anger, surprise rises to take its place.

Perhaps the *hoomans* had realised their folly already, he wondered. Had they sent the lone female in here as an offering? Hoping that in return he would spare them? He bit back a snarl at the idea.

His gaze roams her flesh, drinking her in, growing curious. How long had it been since he'd beheld a female? Of any species, that is. He could not say. Too long, perhaps. Even at his matured age, he'd never been given the chance of mating with one, reviled as he was.

He snorts, clearing his mind. Female or not, he would not be swayed from his mission. She, like the rest of them, would meet the same fate by his claws. He would show none of them even a single slither of mercy.

It was a promise. An oath.

Days pass - at least it feels it. In all honesty, it feels like an eternity passing when you're stuck in a tiny space with nowhere to go and nothing to do. I count the hours by how often the guards bring me food. And I use the word *guards* lightly, as really they were just a pair of Croydon's lackeys. He's made it clear that I am to be watched at all times as if I were some sort of dangerous rabid animal. It's the same two guys that I see every day; a skinny tall man with a silver ear piercing and his stocky companion who went by the name of 'Big Dave'. They bring me food – usually consisting of meagre protein bars – and water. They allowed me bathroom breaks when needed but not without supervision, and handcuffs were always at the ready whenever I was allowed outside of my cell. I might as well have been a criminal in prison for all they cared.

The cage was continuously cold as I had no blankets or extra clothing offered to keep me warm. Each night I'd lay in my corner, shivering, trying to will myself to sleep.

Croydon, despite his unconcealed loathing for me, had visited a few times, preening and sneering at me through the bars as if to gloat of his control over me. One thing I did notice, however, was his obvious fear of the Yautja male sharing my confinement with me. I couldn't exactly blame him either; the hunter's size was nothing to sniff at. Sometimes I would see Croydon whispering to his men, motioning for them to tighten the creature's chains or inject him another dose of whatever drug they were giving it to keep it tame.

Every single time that someone came to visit, I would watch them. Missing nothing. If I had learnt anything since leaving Earth, it was to be as observant as possible, to earn and see everything around you.

Often – especially when my loneliness was at its worst - my mind would wander and I would think of my three hunters, wishing they were with me. To say that I missed them was a huge understatement. A part of me felt broken and empty at them not being at my side. I had to find a way back to them. I just had to.

Determined, I force my focus back to the guards, noting everything. What they talked about. What their routine was. When they left the area for loo breaks, etc. Big Dave always carried a taser device with him and a few knives buckled to the strap across his uniform. His taller companion was somewhat milder tempered and lazy when it came to his duties. Each time Dave ventured into our cell, the other would linger back. They would complete their task and then carefully return to their positions either side of the door again, and each time they would sweep a hand across the panel embedded into the wall there. I soon began to learn that this device was what kept the cell door locked and the lights on, along with all the chains on the male Yautja secured.

Staring, I snap my gaze from it as a large figure suddenly bounds into my view.

"Yo! Are you awake, Princess?" Big Dave bellows, guffawing loudly. He's not talking to me but instead heads straight towards the chained mysterious Yautja. He pulls out a thick syringe filled a clear fluid, the needled end gleaming in the low light. "I've got another nice dose of medicine for ya. So open wide you big, ugly, son of a bitch."

I roll my eyes but keep myself lowered in my corner, not wanting to draw their attention to me. Dave sticks the needle into the hunter's thigh, injecting it swiftly before shooting back as if expecting some kind of attack. None comes. In fact, the creature is so immobile that I struggle to even see its chest move with a breath.

"Cooey!" Dave starts again, jumping forward with false courage as he pats the top of the creatures massive head. "You dumb fucker. You haven't got a clue, have ya?" He spins to shout back to his friend through the bars. "Yo, Stevie! You should see this. This bastard is as limp as a fish. I think we might have killed him."

Stevie laughs. "It's no wonder with all the shit you've jacked him up with. Motherfucker must be high as a kite. Maybe we should have some ourselves, beats sitting here doing crap all day."

Dave snorts. "Yeah, I wish. But you know how the boss man will get if we do that."

"Damn, you're right. Dude just doesn't know when to relax, does he? It's not like the fucker can out and go anywhere. And besides…" I hear the thrum of electricity as Stevie presses his taser, sparking it into life. "This would soon put him on his ass, I'd bet."

You'd bet wrong , I think to myself solemnly. Drugged or not, did the moron really think he could take a Yautja down with that thing? Just the idea of it made me want to laugh. I say nothing and continue to watch them, curious and disgusted all at once.

A heavy thud sounds and I jerk my head up to see Dave is now squaring up to the larger Alien. Even though its slumped in position, it still stands a good four or five heads taller than his aggressor; which is kinda funny to see. *Big dave* looked more like Tiny Dickhead in comparison.

"Holy crap, that hurt!" He laughs, wincing as swings his now injured hand away from where he'd just struck the hunters abdomen. "This dude is built like a brick shithouse. It felt like I was punching a wall." He continues to laugh, casting a grin to his friend who has moved closer to watch.

"I heard it took nearly eight guys to take him down, maybe more. Fought them like a lion."

Dave snorts dismissively. "Yeah, well, he's not so scary now. Pretty pathetic."

They both chuckle, sharing a look. Dave rears back and swings forward again, smacking the tall alien squarely across his mangled jaw. Its head whips back, dark locks flying, but the creature does not stir. No sound comes from it. All is eerily silent.

Roaring even louder now, Dave reaches for the baton at his belt, drawing it into his grasp.

"Let's see how he likes this!"

He swings it, smashing it against the creature's flesh over and over again. The face. His chest. His ribs. Thudding harder with each strike.

Something in me burns at the injustice of it. For being a member of a so-called intelligent species, these guys were ridiculous and cowardly, not to mention stupid. Dangerous or not, they were beating on a weak and helpless being. It could not fight back and could not even defend itself, and it was clear that these animals were showing no sign of stopping. Their excited caws grew with each passing second.

“Yeah, get him good, bro. Make him bleed!”

I finally snap and lurch up to my feet.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

As one, they both still and turn their heads towards me. Dave’s arm hovers, half reared back for his next attack, and his brow furrows.

“The fuck d’you just say?”

I swallow thickly and square my shoulders.

“You heard me. Why are you attacking it? You know very well that it can’t fight back.”

Dave snorts. “Well, of course, it can’t, that’s the whole point.” He taps his temple with meaning. “I ain't stupid, love.”

“Really?” I cross my arms, readying myself for what was to come as soon as my next words spill from my mouth. “Could have fooled me. You both look like a pair of dumb shits.” At their darkened looks I edge closer a step, even though my entire body is screaming at me to cower back. “Why don’t you act like *proper* men and try and fight it while it’s awake? Or maybe you’re too much of a chicken-shit to try?”

I felt uncomfortable lowering myself to their standards, but I was trying to get their attention and draw them away from their victim. And it certainly seemed to be working, as Dave suddenly turns fully towards me and raises his baton in warning.

“You’ve got a big mouth,” he says, “I’d be careful if I were you. I don’t take lightly to—”

“What is going on here?”

We all jerk around to find Li’s slender frame stood in the doorway. His dark eyes warily fly around each of us, clearly knowing something is amiss.

“Oh, nothing,” Dave says with nonchalance, striding from the cage like he owns the place. “We were just playing around. Meant no harm by it.”

Li’s expression tells me that he’s not buying his lie and for that I’m glad. Without his interference, god knows what would have happened had my interaction with these thugs continued. Releasing the breath I hadn’t known I was holding, I relax a little.

“You were given strict orders to—” Li starts, only to be cut off quickly.

“Yeah, yeah,” Dave chirps, flapping his hand dismissively. “Watch the girl. Watch the creature. Keep away from both. Yeah, we know.”

Li simply nods, uncertain but satisfied. “Good.”

“I take it you’re here for the trollop.” I don’t need to ask to know who he’s talking about. He makes it obvious in the way his glare flashes my way. “I’m going for a cig and a dump so don’t keep her long.”

I cringe at that. Wow, talk about TMI. This guy really had no shame.

“Disgusting *grekting* pig,” I utter lowly, watching him walk from the room.

Something moves to my left, so subtle that I almost miss it. Chains clink, ever so quietly.

I look in the hunter's direction, only to find him still in the same position. He hadn’t moved at all and yet…

A flash of white catches my gaze and, curiously, I lower to try and get a better glimpse at the male’s downward turned face. My heart rises into my throat, fear gripping me as I realise…

The Yautja… It’s looking right at me.

Though it hadn’t moved any parts of its body, its head was tilted, just so, so that I could catch the glimmer of its inhuman eyes through the draping mass of its ropey locks. At first, I’d thought my own eyes were deceiving me, but looking closer now, I could see them. One eye was bright and yellow, the other pale and colourless, white as snow.

How odd.

I couldn’t make out much of its features but I could feel its stare like a brand upon my skin. Burning and intense.

Had it heard me? I wondered. Had it understood my words? Perhaps even recognised my curse, considering it was a word that I had learnt from Yaknaur a long time ago.

Heat rushes up my neck as a coldness settles in my belly. I didn’t know how to react or what to even think.

The creature had moved, had heard me, and could understand me.

And it was very much awake.

“You…” I start to whisper aloud with awe and unease. “ Can you….?”

The being remains unmoved, not even its chains move or sway. As if realising its error, it lowers, hiding once again from my view, and for a heartbeat, I wonder if I’ve imagined the whole thing.

“Charlotte?” Someone calls my name and I whip around, startled.

Li is trying to usher me towards him. He seems uneasy and reluctant to cross the threshold to come closer.

“Come,” he says jarringly. “I have been asked to take you to the medic bay.”

I frown at that. “What? Why?” There was nothing wrong with me.

“Croydon’s orders. He wants to have you checked for… possible infections or parasites.”

Parasites? I lift a brow at that. “Are you kidding me?”

Li shakes his head and says nothing, his sheepish expression revealing everything he’s thinking.

“Please,” he says again, gesturing to me again whilst flashing the large hunter a worried look. “It will only take a moment.”

I sigh and straighten, before heading towards him. He takes my arm and starts to guide me towards the exit. I sneak another peek back towards the bound Yautja in the cell to find it as still and motionless as stone. With a frown, I turn away and follow Li through the doorway, eerily aware of the sensation of eyes upon my back. Watching. And incredibly aware.

Chapter 24

"Hello there. You must be Charlotte?"

I pause in the doorway to the medic bay, peering around at the various array of tools and flickering screens before focussing on the tall elderly man stood near the metal examination bench.

"Yes." It's all I say, eyeing him carefully.

Li releases me, stepping aside before motioning me to come forward into the room. I take note of everything, realising that a lot of the technology here belonged to that of the Yautja, including some odd the pieces of armour lined against one of the walls. The pieces were far too big to belong to that of a human; a clear and unsettling reminder that these guys had attacked and taken a hunters ship.

"Who are you?" I ask as the grey-haired man steps closer, gesturing for me to take a seat on the edge of the bench.

"My name is John. John Rainer. We've not met before but don't worry, I won't bite. I was travelling with one of the other groups before coming here." He holds his wrinkled hand out for me to shake. I take it, watching him with some obvious distrust.

He's dressed in camouflage like the others, but the attire seems out of place upon his form. I continue to stare at him, perching myself on the bench. The smile he flashes me is warm, helping me to relax a little.

"Don't worry," he says again. "I'm only going to take a quick blood sample and maybe some swabs. That is if you're ok with that?"

With not much choice, I simply nod. He pulls out a gun-like device. Lifting my arm, he taps at the inside of my elbow before sinking the needle in. I flinch at the sting and silently hope that the stuff he's using has been sterilized beforehand. I glance towards Li, who has his back to us, observing one of the nearby screens.

"So," John speaks up. He leans over me to swipe a strange stick across the skin of my cheek. Taken aback, I stiffen as he sweeps it over the area under my eye before sliding it back into a tube for testing. "How is it that you're here?"

I frown at his question, unsure of what he means.

He gives me a pointed look. "Did you volunteer to be here too?"

Ah. Now I get it. He wants to know why I'm here with the others.

I shake my head. "No. I was at a party with my boyfriend. He's the one who had volunteered and somehow I've managed to get dragged into it all." I shrug wearily, reminded once again

of all the shit and heartache I've been through since being here. "Life has a funny way of screwing you over, it seems."

Despite what I'm saying, a part of me knows I'm not entirely unhappy at the fact that I'm here. After all, if I hadn't been taken along with Jason, I wouldn't have met my hunters. We would have never found each other.

"Oh my," John voices his genuine shock. He tilts his head at me in disbelief. "Truly? I've never met someone who's had that happen before. How odd. You must have been terrified. Did you know anything before coming here?

I shake my head again, smiling dryly. "No. Nothing at all. Jason didn't tell me anything until we arrived here. So, yeah… It's all been fun and games and learning as I go."

"Poor lass." I hear him mutter before turning away to play with the various tools splayed across the workbench.

Beginning to feel awkward, I return to peering around the room. There are weird contraptions and devices everywhere, and I have no idea of what most of them are. But John clearly did, as he moved between them with confidence, knowing exactly which one he needed and how to operate it.

His narrow back bends as his eyes squint to focus on his task. He looks to be in his late sixties, like he should be in front of a Tv with a cup of tea and wearing slippers, rather than here on an alien spacecraft. He really did look out of place here.

"Why are *you* here?" I ask finally, breaking the quietness.

He grunts an 'eh', having not heard me. I repeat myself, louder this time, and he spins to me.

"Oh, me?" He shrugs, offering me another smile. "I chose to come here just like the others had. Granted, this isn't exactly what I'd expected, but I was eager to complete my research and have something of interest to report back to Earth with. "

"So, are you like some kind of scientist then?"

He nods. "Yes, I suppose you could say that. Before I came here I was a Doctor managing my own practice, but then adventure called and…" He throws his arms up, gesturing around him. "Here I am."

"Did you do it for the money?" I ask tentatively, not wanting to offend him.

He chuckles. "My goodness, no. I couldn't give a damn about that. I came here for *knowledge*, my dear. Knowledge is the key." He taps his forehead with meaning.

I want to ask him how long he's been here but decide to keep the rest of my questions to myself. I found it a bit odd and even a little amusing. Out of everyone on this ship, this eccentric old man seemed to be the only one who actually wanted to be here. Ironic much.

“There.” Doctor Rainer chirps, returning to my side with another fatherly smile. His hand lands on my shoulder. “All done. As far as I can see you are perfectly healthy. No critters or reasons to have you quarantined.”

“That’s…good.” What do I even say to that? What were they expecting? That I’d be riddled with fleas and tapeworm like a stray dog?

“Bloods are good,” John continues, flicking across the screened device in his hand, jumping from one graph to another. “No deficiencies or abnormalities. Whatever diet your captors were keeping you on was nutritious enough to keep you and your baby in a stable condition.” He makes one last flourish across the panel before placing it down upon the table beside my hip. “Overall, I’m pleased with your results and will write up a report for the Captain.” He leans forward then, his grey eyes keen with enthusiasm. “But in the meantime, would you be willing to share some details about your captivity with me? I would so love to learn some more about these beasts and their culture. I find them absolutely fascinating and—”

My ears are ringing. My heart is lodge somewhere in my throat as I swallow thickly. It takes me a moment to realise I’m staring at him, lost in a daze of confusion and surprise.

“What did you just say?” I rasp it, barely a whisper.

John pauses and lifts a bushy brow above the rim of his spectacles. “Excuse me?”

Surely I had misheard him. I was imagining things. I had to be.

“You said…” I suck in a shuddering breath before unconsciously lifting a hand to my stomach. “My…?”

I can’t even finish my sentence, yet John seems to know what I’m referring to, as he says, “Why, yes. You and your child are going to be perfectly fine. This is good news, yes?” He pats my hand as though sensing my anxiety. “You have nothing to worry about. The babe is strong and developing well. You should be pleased.”

“But…” I pause for a beat, trying to find my thoughts which seem to be scattered all over the place. “I’m not…”

I look to Li for support, who is watching us silently from the side. His expression is troubled as his eyes drop down to my midriff.

Confused, John says, “Oh, but you are.” He then adds worriedly, “Did you not know?”

At my silence, John smiles at me, somewhat sadly. “Forgive, I should have broken the news to you more gently, but I am afraid it’s true, I am not mistaken. In fact, I can show you it, if you’d like?”

My mind is a mess as my hands start to shake. I can’t believe this is happening. It can’t be. It’s impossible. There must have been some sort of mistake. I couldn’t have children; I knew that with absolute certainty. The doctors back on earth had told me so.

Right?

With little else to do, I nod and allow him to lead me towards one of the large scanning stations nearby. All the while, my insides are churning like butter.

John grabs for another strange device and sweeps it up under my top, causing me to jerk at its coldness against my skin. With a motion, an image pops up onto the screen before us and I gaze at it. Struck dumb.

A small rounded body. Fin-like appendages for arms, barely visible unless you peered closely at it. A domed shaping head with tiny black pits for what seem to be eyes. Moving. Alive. And very real.

I'm numb. I'm shocked beyond reason. And all that kept repeating in my mind was…

What the hell was I going to do now?

Sin'Chila's POV

The repairs are made, the engines prepared and primed for flight. After working on them tirelessly, Sin'Chila and his brothers had made swift work on the damages made to their vessel. It would only be a matter of time before they would be ready to make their chase after the *hoomans*.

Throwing down the broken piece of steel in his claws, Sin'Chila looks towards his kin. Yaknaur nods to him, sharing in his anticipation for what is to soon come. Memnis rolls out from beneath the belly of the ship's hull.

"It is done," Memnis rumbles, rising to his feet.

Sin'Chila inclines his head, the ropes of his mane swaying about his powerful shoulders. His weapons are sharpened to perfection, strapped to his frame as though they are a part of his physical being. His plan is formed, his resolve set. The time for their precious hunt was nigh.

"Good," He hisses, gesturing to them in command. "Make haste and clear the area. We must begin our pursuit."

Their chorused growls rumble in agreement and as one they begin to stride up the ramp with one firm purpose in mind.

Following up after his brothers, Sin'Chila's purrs. "Let it begin."

They would not fail again. Not even the Great spirits themselves would deny them. It was time to find their *Chakria* and bring her back to her rightful place. And they would not return until the deed was complete.

I find it impossible to sleep. No matter how much I tried to relax, the events from earlier on keep replaying themselves in my mind. As promised, the good Doctor, John, had shown me exactly what I had both wanted and not wanted to see.

A baby… *My* baby.

At first, I'd thought my eyes were deceiving me when John had brought the obscure image up on one of the screens. Though somewhat unclear and fuzzy, the image had clearly been that of an embryo.

For what seemed like an age, I'd just stood there in disbelief. All that I had considered true about my infertility had been wrong. I'd been so sure that such a thing was impossible for me yet I had seen the evidence of it first-hand. And the more I considered it, the more it confused me further as I tried to figure it out. After all, my lovers hadn't been human, they were aliens, and here, anything was possible. Memories of them healing me kept repeating over and over again. Could it be that they'd done more than just heal my legs? Had they given me something more?

I honestly didn't know how to feel. I was elated and yet fearful. Happy and yet devastated. And now, back in my cell once again, I was tormented by the idea of what the future would hold for me.

Back in the bay, John had asked me question after question, seeking answers as to who the father was and why I hadn't known about it. I'd tried to dodge his queries, even avoiding Li's delving stare as I desperately tried to keep the truth from them. I couldn't tell them about any of it. It would surely lead to complications, not only for me but for the child as well.

"Please, don't tell Croydon about this, or anyone, for that matter. I don't want people to know." I'd begged to them both. And even though they were confused by my plea, they'd both agreed, promising to keep my secret safe.

Every protective instinct within me was urging me to say nothing. I was alone here, with none of my hunters to protect me. What would the others do if they knew that I was carrying an alien's young in my belly? What would they do to me? To it? Every horrifying possibility was rushing at me, almost forcing me to a blinding panic.

Slumping back into my corner, I hug my knees as my tears quietly fall. Feeling alone, I sniffle and try to seek comfort in the silence. John had been kind enough to provide me with a set of pants and a shirt – similar to what the others were wearing – yet I still felt the coldness of the floor seeping through to my bones.

Absently, my hand rubs at my stomach. There wasn't a bulge there yet - as I had been told the pregnancy was only in its early stages – but eventually, it would start to show and I would become obvious to everyone around me. More vulnerable.

I couldn't stay here, that was certain, and if I returned to Earth now my fate would be bleak and horrible. I had to find a way out of here, no matter what. I needed to get off this damn ship.

Peering around, fear fed me reckless thoughts as a plan slowly began to form in my mind. With a shard of determination, my gaze slides towards the crumpled form of the hunter a short distance away and then to the guards.

Foolish or not, I had to try something…

Darvik's POV

The female is in distress. Her tiny mewls are weak but Darvik's keen hearing catches each one with clarity. Through his mane, he watches her, keeping his face lowered and hidden. The length of his arms ache, yet he fights back the urge to flex them, not wanting to draw any attention his way. The two *hooman* males sit by the exit, their gaze sweeping in their direction every now and then. They show no concern for the smaller being caged with him, nor do they approach at the sound of her weeping. They simply continue with their strange exchange of squares, shouting out in victory in what seems like a game of sorts.

Returning his attention to the female, Darvik takes in her change in robes. Now donned in dark hues, her shapely form is covered from his viewing, causing him to huff slightly. Why did their kind seem so intent of covering their pale hides all the time? Darvik could not understand it.

Even interesting still was the fact that the female was imprisoned along with him to begin with. Why would they do this? She was no threat. The tiny creature barely looked strong enough to lift her own weight, let alone cause destruction. Nonetheless, she was here – an enemy of his enemy. Outcasted by her own kind…. A feeling Darvik begrudgingly knew only too well.

Weak and still barely a youngling, he wanders through the trees, seeking shelter amongst the female tribe. His own had denied him, casting him out for being so pitiful. An unworthy male.

"He should have been destroyed," the other hunters had said.

"He will not be of any use to us. He is too small and sickly."

In their numbers, they had chased him from all that he had known. His home. His people.

"You are not welcome here," the other clans had declared, refusing to help him. "Death is your fate now, young one. Now be gone from here, lest you feel the tip of my spear."

Frightened, he had fled. Through terrible seasons, he had survived alone, relying only on himself. Alone, he had learnt to hunt, to live, to defend that which was his. But never did he forget the injustice they had shown to him. With little care for anything, he had hunted all, even his own kind. He gave them as much mercy as they had given to him…

None.

'Bad Blood', they called him now. Worthless. Mateless. A hunter without true honour. He was no longer a youngling to be pitied and denied. Now, he was a warrior to be feared and reviled, avoided at all cost.

But this *hooman* was no warrior. She would surely perish by herself should the others choose to abandon her; that thought alone sent a strange lurch through his being…

No. He forced the thoughts away with vehemence. He would not be swayed. Not for anyone. None of it was of his concern. In the end, none of it would matter. They would all meet the same fate in the end. Biting back a snarl, Darvik returns to his pretend slumber. Listening. Watching.

As though sensing the path of his thoughts, the female lifts her alien face towards him. Through the gloom, he makes out the sharp darkness of her eyes. A strange glint gleams within them, taking him aback.

Slowly, she stands, stepping towards him.

Their gazes meet and hold, causing something unnatural to stir in the air between them.

Determination sweeps over her then; Darvik can see it clearly like a beacon of energy about her frame.

So… There is fire in her still, it would seem. Perhaps not so weak after all.

A long moment draws out. Darvik can almost taste her resolve and fierceness upon the air, causing him to frown.

What is she--?

His thoughts are cut short. Suddenly, and without warning, the female emits the loudest shrilling shriek ever to be heard, only to then throw herself to the floor in a writhing heap.

Chapter 25

I thrash around on the hard ground, twisting and writhing in apparent agony. I force disturbing noises from my throat; gurgles and cries loud enough to snap the two guards to attention. In the corner of my vision, I see their heads spin towards me. For good measure, I dribble a little saliva out of my mouth and roll my eyes, continuing my Oscar-winning performance like a champ.

“What the…” One of them says, standing from their seat.

“Holy shit. What the fuck is wrong with her? Is she… having a seizure?” Says the other, who quickly darts for the cell door in panic.

It takes me a brief horrible second to realise it’s *Big Dave* who has come to my so-called aid; much to my disappointment. I try to fight back my groan, as I’d hoped it would have been the less-heavier of the two who’d come to me first. It would seem no such luck was on my side today.

The metal barred door slides open… and stays open.

I hide a smile and burrow my face into the floor as Dave drops to his knees beside me. His large masculine hand grabs my shoulder.

This is it. No backing out now.

“What’s up with her? Go get the doc before she—"

He starts to roll me over and I swing into action. Going with the motion, I jab my elbow out, catching him in the nose with it. Something cracks. He yelps and rears back, momentarily blinded as he lifts a palm to his face in pain.

“What the fuck!”

Taking my moment, I roll away from him, my feet skidding for purchase as I scramble up and dart for the door. Heart pounding, I almost reach it, only to be stopped by a strong hand latching around my upper arm, jarring me to a halt.

“Stupid bitch! What the fuck do think you’re doing?” Big Dave is all rage and strength, bellowing down at me as he yanks me back into the middle of the cage.

I cry out, struggling against him wildly. His grip is like steel on my arm, bruising and without restraint. My face scrunches up in agony as I wriggle to be free. My knee comes up and slams into his upper thigh, missing its intended target.

“Let go of me!” I yell, only to be harshly flung aside as though I’m nothing more than a stuffed toy.

I land with a thud, slightly winded. My elbow smarts against the floor and I twist to peer up at the large man standing over me. I'm panting hard like I'm doing rounds with a professional boxer, absolutely terrified.

Fists clenched, Dave towers with a snarl. Furious.

"Well, that was dumb, wasn't it? Now you've really pissed me off!"

He lunges for me without warning. With little else to do, I try and scoot backwards to get away from him. Shaking like crazy, I crab-crawl like a pro, dragging myself back until my spine finally slams into something behind me… something firm… and somewhat… *fleshy.*

I hear a low growl before I can even register what's happened. My hand involuntarily lands onto a warm, large foot. The being behind me tenses and I become incredibly aware of where I am, and of *who* I'm touching.

With a choked gasp, my head rears back, neck arching, to find the chained rogue predator hanging over me. The chains around him jangle as he shifts. The back of my head touches his muscled thigh. The smell of him – the scent of something earthy and male – hits me. The long locks of his wild hair drape over his features, cascading us both into shadow. Before now, I'd only caught glimpses of his appearance, yet from my position below him, I can clearly make out the horrendous visage of his face.

Oh… my…. God…

If I'd thought he was terrifying before, then this moment only encouraged that feeling further.

The scars…

Good god, he was covered in them. He honestly looked like he'd had a fight with Edward Scissorhands – and lost. White and grey puckered marks decorate his coppery cheeks and forehead. There are more down his chest and arms too. One in particular – the worst of them all – splits down his left eye, almost slicing his face in half with its devastating length. The eye itself is pure white, colourless like paper, yet there is no denying the dangerous intent I see lurking within its depths. The other one – as it should be – is a glittering yellow hue. Bright and inhuman.

What had happened to him? I consider it for a mere heartbeat.

Even one of his tusks on the right side of his mandibles is broken off short, the flesh around it knobbly and textured like the remaining tissue after a burn of some sort.

I'm staring. I know I am. I can't seem to help myself. I'm trapped in both awe and terror as I take him in, surprised to find, albeit belatedly, that he's doing the exact same thing to me too.

His gaze is like ice and fire, taking me in with unfathomable intent. His terrible mouth parts, the fleshy insides flashing in a clear sign of aggression. He's not happy at all by the fact I'm touching him. The muscles of his arms flex as though dying to break free, just to be able to rip off my head for my daring.

“Oh sh—It’s awake.” Dave voices the statement at the exact same time that I think it. “We need more sedation! Get it now!”

Time slows. My eyes meet the Yautja’s again and, for a long second, we simply stare at each other. My ears are thrumming with my own pulse. My body is shaking so badly that I bet he can feel it through his leg. I remove my hand from his person as though burnt. The hunter releases a hiss at me before lifting his lethal attention towards Dave.

Something scaly and heavy slips against my shoulder…

“Hurry the fuck up!” Dave shouts to Stevie, growing frustrated when the taller man simply stands there, flabbergasted and uncertain. “He’s gonna— Ack!”

His strangled cry forces my gaze to him. A gasp leaves me as I see the massive appendage now wrapped around his neck. The hunter’s tail – a thick mobile trunk of a limb – has shot forward, ensnaring around the man’s throat like a python. It tightens and Dave squirms, his face going red with the need for oxygen.

“Dave!”

Stevie lunges forward to save his friend. The hunter, aware of his new incoming opponent, tosses the now unconscious man aside with a sneer. Stevie raises his taser to attack. The creature’s crocodile-like tail whips out and hits him with precision and swiftness, sending him flying into the wall with a sickening thud.

Fear tears into me and I shoot up, taking my chance to dive towards the door. The Yautja hisses again and I feel, rather than see, his tail rushing out for me. The air stirs and something brushes against my back just as I manage to leap out of his reach.

An alarm blares suddenly into life and I know that I’m running out of time. More men would come. And soon.

I head for the panel in the wall, sweeping and pressing shit to try and open the main doors that lead out into the corridor outside. I manage to find its combination and it slides open with a whoosh. I take a step, about to leave the area, but then pause.

I peer back over my shoulder, eyeing the hunter, who is still snarling like I’m his worst enemy. His eyes are ablaze, burning into me with loathing and violence.

I can’t say I blame him. Even though he’s dangerous, he looks like he’s been through hell and back. I couldn’t help but wonder then as to where his clan was, his brothers. Why hadn’t they come for him? My compassionate nature springs to the fore and for some reason, I’m reluctant to leave him like this.

And then an idea hits me…

Of course. I could just set him free. Right? Hopefully, he would take no notice of me and head straight for the others. It would be a distraction; something I would desperately need if I was going to try and find the escape pods and get out of here.

Footsteps approach, gaining quickly. Adrenaline rushes at me, robbing me of my logic. Without further consideration, I lean over and sweep at the panel again, trying to find the one I'd need to release the chains bindings him.

I press a combination and the hunter roars when the bindings tighten further.

"Oops, my bad," I whisper more to myself than to him. "Wrong one."

It takes a moment but I finally manage to find the sequence. A beep sounds. The chains loosen and then fall to the floor with a loud clatter. The male shakes himself out like a dog before rising to his full height.

My last remaining thought, before I make the final mad dash to the exit is - holy crap, this dude is huge.

Time to run.

"Everyone to the main deck!" Someone shouts.

"Activate all the security doors!"

"Oh my god! Run! Quickly! It's coming!"

I dive into the throng of people now rushing towards the main section of the ship. Like ants, they flood the corridor I'm in, almost sweeping me away with them in their desperate bid to escape. None of them takes any notice of my presence. As far as they're concerned, I am one of them; a fellow human. Everyone is panicked, trying to run away from the massive predator now loose amongst them. Hunting them.

Hair flying, I look one way and then jump, trying to peer over the mass of heads to figure out where I need to be going. Though the ship is slightly different from what I know, the layout is pretty much the same; there had to be an area with the escape pods in them somewhere.

I dart down a corridor, only to pull up short and retreat at the sound of guns firing and bestial roars coming from nearby.

Yep. No. Let's go a different way, I say mentally to myself. *You can do this, Lottie. Keep going.*

Taken by a rush of adrenaline, I fight against the swarm again and dive to the right, sprinting down the corridor there. My panting breaths are killing me, reminding me of how physically unfit I am. Legs fixed or not, running was never going to be a skill I would excel at, of that I was certain.

More blasts come as pounding footsteps thud and cause the floor under my feet to vibrate. The alarm is still blaring, deafening with its loudness.

I shoot down another narrow stretch of walkway and burst into a pleased grin when I see a set of pods waiting at its end. Each dome is empty. The lights beside them are flashing green, ready to be activated.

I race towards one and reach for the control panel.

Something - a hand - latches onto my hair then. It pulls hard, nearly ripping my locks from my scalp. I shriek aloud as my entire weight is pulled backwards. Unceremoniously, I'm flung down towards the ground and land with a grunt.

"You!"

I roll to face my attacker. His icy eyes stab into me, seething with malice. His stubbled jaw works, the heavy set of his shoulders bulging with the need for violence as he moves to stand over me.

Croydon.

"What have you done, you little shit?!" He reaches down and grabs for the front of my clothing. With ease, he lifts me to my knees, bringing my face within inches of his. "This is all your doing, isn't it?" He shakes me hard and my teeth rattle. "Isn't it! I knew you would be trouble as soon as I'd let you onto this ship!"

"Get your fucking hands off me!" I shout back, struggling to break free of him.

"The hell I will! You've tested my patience one too many times now! Get your ass on the deck with the others. Now!"

He starts to pull me down the hallway, back the way I'd originally come. He drags my smaller self as though I'm nothing but a stubborn dog not wanting to go for its walk. My knees scrape as I pinch and claw at his hands, trying to tear them from me in a bid to be free.

With a curse, he swings back to me, fist raised as though to land a punch. "You're a traitor to your own kind. Do you know that? You should have been left to rot in that jungle like the scum that you—"

A sickening *Sshk* sounds and Croydon stiffens, stilling mid-attack. Through the curtain of my hair, I peer up at him and then emit a scream of horror to see that a huge curved blade is protruding through the middle of his chest. Blood pools there, staining his shirt a darkened shade. More dribbles from his mouth as he chokes on it. His eyes meet mine, shocked and in pain. His chest moves to take a breath but he doesn't seem to manage it.

The blade is smoothly pulled back through his torso by its owner and Croydon crumples to the side, drawing still in a fallen heap.

Dead.

A huge hulking shape takes his place, stalking forward like a beast on the prowl. All my energy drains from me then, along with my courage.

It's him… The hunter from the cage.

Although he's now donned in the trademark armour of his species, I could recognise him anywhere. A large black helmet covers his face, gleaming in the light, yet somehow I know inwardly that he's snarling at me. Large webbed feet plant either side of my hips before the Yautja lowers, crouching over my helpless form. Sheer terror forces me to lay flat against the ground. My arms rise, one banding around my middle and the other above my head in an attempt to protect myself.

Trembling, I suck in a breath. "Please," I whisper, hoping that it can understand me. "Wait… I am not a threat to you." I open my hands to show him that I carried no weapons.

The mountainous being slams a hand down next to my head and I jerk on reflex, expecting to be attacked. Thickened ropey locks brush my face as he leans closer. A low grumble vibrates through him before he stills. His chest expands, inhaling deeply. He's… smelling me?

I finally find the courage to look at him with wide eyes.

What's he doing?

I watch him warily as his head tilts this way and that; a curious motion, even though every muscle in his body is thick and hardened for battle.

Hey. If he wants the escapes pods for himself then that's fine with me. I won't argue with him. They're all his. He can have them. I had no intention of challenging him. In fact, if he could just ignore my existence completely, that would be marvellous.

His low muffled growl sends a shudder and goosebumps rippling down my back. His heavy weight against me is almost suffocating, his closeness overbearing.

His tail lashes out behind him, sweeping back and forth like a cat's. Restless. Noises come from behind the visor close to my face, his mandibles clacking together. I close my eyes tight, preparing for the worst to happen.

A second passes. And then a minute.

Suddenly, he rises and moves away. I squint upwards and the thickness of his thighs alone are downright intimidating. A loincloth covers his groin yet I catch a brief glimpse of his bulge as he lazily steps over me, heading for one of the pods.

I inhale, realising then that he's not going to hurt me. In fact, now he's not interested in me at all. Releasing a quiet sigh of relief, I roll over and slyly attempt to crawl away. I shuffle on my hands and knees like my life depends on it and all the while I can hear the Yautja pressing at one of the panels behind me.

I begin to rise, about to make a final bid to freedom, when something strong heaves itself around my middle in a vice-like hold.

Shocked, I look down and find the hunter's tail there, heavy and inhumanly strong.

"Oh, you've got to be joking," I mutter to myself.

The hefty limb tightens around me, lifting me smoothly in one pull. The world whirls and spins. Before I know it, I'm thrown into one of the pods. The leather seat I land onto jams into my hip, causing me to yelp out in pain. To my further horror, the dangerous hunter's towering self climbs in after me, joining me within the narrow globe-shaped container.

And then it dawns… Wherever this guy is going he's planning to take me with him.

Oh crap.

He smashes at the controls, causing the pod to hum and shudder. I have no chance to scream for help or to even try and climb out of the pit as the doorway shuts, sealing us both inside.

My fate is sealed then. I'm trapped.

The pod detaches, taking us with it. And then… we're flying through space.

Chapter 26

Memnis' POV

The engines rumble into life, readying for take-off. Sat in his piloting chair, Memnis sets the coordinates, preparing the maps as his brother beside him, Yaknaur, uses the navigation systems to scan the skies to ensure clearance. He sweeps across the controls with ease, pressing each section before scanning the screens at his side. Something catches his gaze in its reflection. Turning to peer over his shoulder, he sees one the Daku hounds sniffing around one the chairs lower down. *Lar-tee's* chair.

Something in him churns, deep and aching. The creature jumps up, looking around as though expecting its owner to be there. Only she is not. How many times had he glanced back to find her there? He considered it. How many times had he watched her curling up against the hound's furs, revelling in their attention?

And now it was empty… because of him.

Even now, he could still hear her voice calling for him. At that very moment, when she had needed him most, to protect her, he had fallen, losing her in process. Though the wounds in his hand had started to heal, the sting in his breast still remained, ever-present and tormenting him.

"Brother… *Look."*

Broken from his thoughts, Memnis returns his focus to his task and Yaknaur, who is now watching the interactive map hovering before him with keen intensity. Memnis stares at it as well, taking note of the area where a claw is now pointing.

"Something is entering the planet's atmosphere," Yaknaur states.

Curious, Memnis urges him to zoom in for a closer inspection of it. The icon there enlarges, showing a small shuttle heading towards land at an alarming speed. Though small, it could not be a large enough vessel to carry many. From its shape, it did not look *hooman* in design.

And then it dawns… It is a Yautja vessel. One similar to their own.

Memnis and Yaknaur turn to one another, sharing their confusion.

Their sole focus should have been on leaving the planet, to follow the *hoomans* fleeing them, yet something within Memnis pauses. An echo of something rushes at him. A silent calling.

Could it be?

Straightening, he emits a trill. His instincts were never wrong. There was something *odd* about this tiny ship now coming towards them. He could feel it with every fibre of his being.

Nudging at Yaknaur's larger self, he says, "Go. Find our eldest and tell him about this."

Leaning over, he starts to shut down all the engines again, sending the ship into a dull silence.

Yaknaur nods, surging from his seat, his excitement tangible.

"And you?" He asks gruffly.

Memnis launches up, snapping his claws loudly, bringing three of his hounds to attention and swiftly to his side. They curl around his thighs as he reaches for his visor and weapons, strapping them into position.

He starts to stride towards the door, but not before saying, "I will go and scout the area. Await for my contact. I will return shortly."

"Hurry," Yaknaur warns. "You know Sin'Chila. He will not wish to wait."

Memnis trills in agreement and then he's gone, striding from the deck with his skilled hunting beasts following at his heels.

Our pod lands and not without discomfort or difficulty. As soon as we'd hit the planet's barrier, sheer terror had gripped me as our spherical containment started to spin faster, growing hot like a god damned oven. We'd seemed to crash into every tree and rock on our way down, only to stop the moment we had slammed into a solid cliff's edge.

Even though I can't see it, the door whooshes open and the cool air outside drives in, forcing away all the burning heat around me. For a long, terrifying time I simply lay there. Disorientated.

Senses reeling, I unstrap myself from my seat. My insides feel like they're in all the wrong places. My head is pounding as if my brain is trying to escape the confinement of my skull. The glass surrounding me is splintered and cracked, threatening to fully cave in like an avalanche.

With careful movements, I practically crawl towards the exit and ungracefully climb my way out. My body slams into the ground. Dirt and blades of luminous grass plaster to my face as it hits me…

We're back.

Somehow we've managed to return to the jungle; I could recognise it anywhere. The vibrant trees and foliage. The pinken-golden dusky skies with more than one moon in its distance. The familiar smell of dampened mossy earth and the wilds of nature.

I'm home.

I start to pull myself up, grunting as every bone in my body protests with aches. I have no idea where I am but my joy and hope is flaring anew.

Thrusting my hair out of my face, I part-stumble towards the dense lining of trees in front of me. If I could just find a way to someplace of familiarity, I might be able to get back to my—

Something heavy latches around my ankle and before I can move another step, I'm brought down to the ground with an *oomph.* Winded, I roll over, only to find a very familiar and intimidating looking hunter standing over me.

White and yellow eyes stab deeply into mine, feral and bright like ice and fire.

"You," I whisper it, more to myself than to him.

With the shadows casting over him, the mysterious hunter who had brought me here looked more satanic than ever. His helmet is gone now and the dark edges of his alien features appear vicious, giving me the impression that he's not even the slightest bit happy to see me.

His tail releases me, whipping back to his side like a trusty companion. Snarling, the hunter moves closer, leaning down and pinning me to the spot with the sheer magnitude of his terrifying presence. The ridges of his scars twist as he scowls down at me, displeased, yet I don't know why.

Why had he taken me? I couldn't work it out. I don't even get the chance to ponder it further, as he lunges down and grabs for my nape. Sharp claws almost pierce my skin as he yanks me upwards like a naughty pup. He starts to walk, all but dragging my much smaller frame along with him as though I'm a child about to get grounded for throwing a stone at someone's greenhouse.

"Hey! What the-- Let go of me!"

I start to struggle in earnest, kicking and scratching in a desperate bid to be free. My blows don't affect him in the slightest and he doesn't break his powerful stride once.

To my surprise, he starts to bark something, his tone commanding. The translator at my ear gives a buzz, causing me to wince at its loud interference. As the hunter continues to grumble, it begins to vibrate slightly, no doubt learning the wording and patterns of his speech. I catch two phrases in particular: *Weakling* and *Hooman*. Human.

"I said, let me go!" I roll and jerk harder. "God damn it, I know you can understand me, asshole!"

I go slack, forcing myself into deadened weight, hoping to make it all the more difficult for him. At one point, I grab onto his bare gleaming leg and sink my teeth into his muscular thigh like a wild animal. Which turns out to be a very bad idea, as suddenly he spins to me with a roar.

Before I can blink, throws me down again and lunges. All power and muscle, his massive body covers mine, swallowing it with his size. If he hadn't been considering killing me

before, I bet he was thinking about it now. Though he's barely making contact, his threat is clear.

"W-what do you want from me?" I stutter, cringing away as one might from a dangerous, unpredictable animal. "Why did you take me? I am of no use to you."

"I…" His guttural trills convert slowly through the crackle of my translator. "… Am called Darvik… And you…" he sneers, flashing his jaws wide in a sign of impatience. "… are now… my *prize.*"

"Y-Your what?" Was he kidding? I sincerely hoped so.

As though reading my doubt, he motions with his head towards the sky. There are no beads or decorations in his tubular hair, I notice, no small treasures of victory or valour like the majority of his kind wore. My eyes follow his movement, finding a flock of huge black crow-like birds circling amongst the clouds above us.

"Do you see them?" The hunter, Darvik, rumbles. "They are *Vultin's,"* he explains with a sneer. "And they enjoy the taste of *hooman* flesh the most." His massive hand wraps around my nape again, tugging me forward within inches of his monstrous face. "Should you continue to fight me, I will not hesitate to feed you to them." To emphasise his point, he flexes his free hand, flashing his blackened claws as he adds, "piece by tiny piece… Understood?"

Jesus Christ, this dude was downright terrifying. Swallowing thickly, I nod. Despite his closeness, my eyes keep flying up towards the hunting birds warily. Even from this angle, they look massive, like they've evolved from the time of the dinosaurs or beyond.

Before I can utter another sound, my body is lifted. Strong arms heft me up, slinging me over a powerful shoulder with ease. I grunt at the impact as the world whirls. It would seem that despite my desire to escape, I wasn't exactly sure what to be afraid of the most; the hunter carrying me off or the creatures around us. Neither, I decided, were options I wanted to tempt fate with.

Darvik POV

His plans would not be spoiled, least of all not by the foolish *hooman* now in his keeping. By the spirits, her insistent noise and struggling was starting to make his skull throb. She was like a youngling, loud and unwise to the dangers around her. Such an ignorant little beast. In the past, he had hunted and killed many of her kind. What would one more hurt? It would be only too easy to throw her down and snap her neck before she could even blink. He'd almost succumbed to the desire back on the ship. That is until he saw *it*…

Life. There was new life growing within her womb. Through the shifting displays of his visor, he had easily seen the being now developing in her body. Small and yet healthy. It's heartbeat steady and strong. For a brief instance, surprise had truly gripped him. He had seen many a creature, large and small, carrying young, but never in a *hooman* before. The sight of it had stilled his attack, a plan forming even then of what he would do with her.

No. He still had a need for her. The *hooman's* had taken everything from him and in return, he would seek his vengeance. Her people would come for her, that much he knew. To carry a suckling must mean that she had a mate, one that would surely be looking for her.

They had barely made it back to his homeworld unscathed, yet already he could scent and feel the presence of another following them from a distance. Whoever they were, they were skilled at tracking, gaining on them steadily with each passing of the sun in the sky.

Let them come, Darvik thought with a growl. He would be ready for them. And in the end, he would be the one victorious. Each of their deaths would come by his hands and their heads would become his trophies. Calming, his anger simmered. Luckily for him, the female's wriggling had seized, forcing her into dull submissiveness.

With a grunt, Darvik continues his long trek through the trees, keeping his senses hyper-aware of every sound and movement around him.

Yes. He would lure his prey to him using the pregnant female as his bait. Once his goal was complete, she would meet the same fate as the others, or perhaps he would even keep her as a pet for his own amusements. The more he considered the idea, the more he disliked it. After all, she was a useless tiny thing, not worthy of any value.

The limp being in his hold, though small and meek, was also daring. The way she had managed to escape her captors back on the ship had been brave, if even foolish. Her spirited nature would surely drive him to madness before his mission was completed, this he knew. Although she carried life within her, he would have to keep her subdued and obedient, he decided. He had no wish to be patient or merciful towards her, female or not. She was nothing to him, and he needed no one.

For now, he would focus on seeking out shelter and finding a supply of water. He knew these lands well, more than most; there had to be a stream nearby. He would need to replenish and gather his strength, and then, he would be ready for them. Ready to take back all of that which had been taken from him and bathe his body in blood.

Memnis' POV

He hunted them through until dusk. Only when the sun started to set amongst the horizon, casting the land around him in low light, did Memnis decide to return back to the ship. He had caught no sight of Lar-tee, or of her captor, but knew now with certainty that she had

been taken. She was here. By some miraculous miracle, the Great Spirits had brought her back to them, within their reach.

Whatever gut feeling had led him here was sure to be of destiny's making. He had found the pod a good distance away, in the east, by the mountains of *Dreva'duhn* – the ravine where the *Vultin* and *Harvas* dwelt. His Daku hounds had led the way, bringing him straight to its location. At first, he had feared the worst, approaching the site with caution, only to find the craft empty. There had been sure signs of living creatures leaving the area; the scent of Yautja and *hooman* strong upon the air like a stench.

Memnis lowers to a crouch, touching at the trampled ground in thought. There are footsteps. Small ones, followed by much larger ones; even wider than those of his own, yet undeniably that of a male hunter.

Whomever this warrior was, Memnis could already tell he was of a formidable size, perhaps even bigger than his own two brothers; they would need to tread with caution. Their tracks led further north, disappearing towards the darkened forest of the *Navavin*. It was a place that most sane, living creatures avoided. A place where even the strongest of hunters are hunted.

Fury feeds his resolve. With each passing moment, their mingling scents would grow weaker and Memnis would lose them soon if he did not hasten his report back to his brothers.

"Come!" He snaps, shooting up from his crouch. His hounds lift their heads from sniffing at the ground, bounding towards his side, ready for their next command from their master.

If this mysterious hunter had their *Chakria* they would need to be fast and sly. It would take all of them to bring him down, of that Memnis was certain. Biting back a snarl, Memnis only hoped that their Lar-tee was unharmed and in one piece. Otherwise, not even the slowest and most painful of deaths would be enough for the one who had taken her. This he vowed.

With that, he breaks into a run, launching up into the trees in a maddened rush towards home.

Chapter 27

By the time half the day has passed, I am tired and fed up with being lugged around like a sack of grain. My ribs are paining me to the point of madness and every time I try to wriggle or adjust myself my grumpy captor growls and snaps at me like a chastising parent. Despite how far he's carried me, he hasn't wavered or tired in the slightest. His stamina is impressive, to say the least. For what feels like hours, branches and trees drift past me. Some gold, some green, some even fluorescent blue and completely unfamiliar to me. I had no idea of where he was planning to take me, but he seemed fixed on reaching his destination with all the focus of herd heading for water. His powerful arms keep me against him, draped over his shoulder with ease. His footsteps never stumble once, not even when he begins to climb over a scattering of large rocks.

With little else to do, I hang there and observe everything, mentally taking note of every detail of our surroundings; the map in my mind forming. Although this hunter was strong and clever, I knew I would have to be smarter. For now, I would remain submissive and weak, but when the time came – as soon as he gave me the opportunity – I would flee from this place, and him. I would not surrender to whatever hell destiny had in mind for me this time. I would escape. I had managed it before, so I could do it again. And that thought alone filled me with even more determination.

As the sun began to dive back down towards the horizon, the air cooled and quietness around us thickened. The hues of the jungle lost some of it glowing hues; a sure sign that night was well on its way. We would need to bunker down somewhere soon for safety.

It doesn't take long until my captor stops, drawing us both into a hollowed-out enclosure within a face of huge rocks. A cave of some sorts. Without care, the Yautja – Darvik, did he say his name was? – throws me down into one corner; the farthest from the entrance, and simply walks away. He doesn't spare me much focus and instead starts to gather up leaves and branches. Even though the cave is fairly wide, the hunter easily swallows up most of the space with his size. His thickly maned head nearly touches the ceiling, causing him to hunker down in certain parts to avoid banging it.

Finally glad to be released, I scramble back and huddle into myself, hoping that the brute was planning to leave me alone for a while. The ground beneath me is cold, seeping into my skin. By the time night fully took its hold over the land, I knew the low temperature would be uncomfortable, perhaps even dire.

As though reading my very thoughts, the mysterious hunter strides outside, only to return mere seconds later with twigs and an arrangement of massive heart-shaped leaves. With swiftness, he builds us a fire and the leaves flare into life like gasoline to a match. Both anxious and curious, I watch him, giving a sigh when a rush of soothing heat suddenly hits me. A yellow glow fills the cave, covering its walls with light and shadows.

I say nothing and hug my knees to my chest, trying to remain as quiet as possible to prevent the hunter's attention from returning to my person. My heart is heavy as I recall all of the times I'd nestled up with my hunters. Of all the times they'd been there to hold be between them. To keep me warm. To keep me safe. And now they weren't here. I was alone with some unknown male; one who seemed more likely to tear out my spine if I so much as stepped on his toe.

My captor settles a distance away, his profile broad and monstrous in the flickering glow of the fire. I sigh quietly to myself as loneliness forms an empty ache within my chest.

Something rustles. The hunter pulls out a small pouch. Sharp black claws open it and I notice it's full of various strips of what looks to be dried meats. I don't recognise what type it is, but my mouth begins to water as I eye it hungrily. My stomach rumbles and I'm reminded once again of how long it'd been since I'd eaten or drank anything.

As if sensing my gaze, the hunter, Darvik, slides his gaze towards me. White and yellow eyes glare at me, sliding over my small self. Within them, I see hatred and disgust, and also something else unfathomable. For a long beat, we maintain eye contact, but then quickly drop my gaze when his mouth splays wide in a gesture of dominant aggression.

Without pause, he wolfs down the meat, demolishing it noisily. The dark tusks at his mouth snap as he chews and tears at its leathery texture with ease, destroying it within seconds. All the while, he's looking right at me, as if daring me to try and take his food from him. He doesn't intend to share and he rumbles out a snarl for good measure, making his point clear.

Ok. Fair enough.

Retreating further back, I turn away and bury myself against the rocky wall. I press my cheek to it, absently listening as the hunter finishes his small feast. My insides grumble again and I force myself into a state of mindless daydreaming; a distraction to separate myself from the bleakness of my reality.

For a long time, I lay there, dreaming, wondering as to what my hunters were up to. Were they looking for me? Did they even know I was here? I wanted to return to them so much that I could barely stand it. The idea of escaping this Yautja seemed almost impossible. Absently, I rub a hand across my belly and told myself that whatever plan or action I took from now on would have to be considered carefully. There wasn't just me to consider now. There was a baby. *My* baby.

What would it look like once it was born? I wondered. Like me? Like them? Tusks, claws and webbed feet etc? Did I even want it? I mean, of course, I'd always wanted a family of my own. But this was different. I had no idea of what it meant to be a mother; this would all be very new territory for me. And whilst I was a human, the father was not; I didn't even know which of my hunters was the dad-to-be. They had all slept with me. They had all filled me with their--… I stop there and shudder a little, rubbing my thighs together at the memories that sprung up unbidden.

God, I missed them. So much. I wanted them here with me. Holding me.

The longer I sit there, lost in memories, the more uncomfortable the ground becomes beneath me. When I shift about to try and ease the pain in my back, the male across from me whips his head around, growling low. Unable to help myself, I scoff at him. Did he really have to be so unpleasant all the time? His glowing eyes burn from across the distance, observant as a wolfs. Every time I so much as make a noise or itch my nose he tenses, reaching for the weapon at his belt as though expecting *me* to try and attack *him*.

I smile wryly. Yeah, as if that's going to happen. The guy was a mountain and I was like an ant in comparison. He could easily break me in half and we both knew it. Besides, I wouldn't have dared.

I settle back into position and close my eyes, allowing the quietness to sweep me up into a faint sense of comfort. The sharp pops of fire kept me on alert, listening out for every sound, both nearby and outside.

Eventually, I feel myself beginning to drift off. Wrapped up in a cocoon of heat, I could feel my limbs growing slack. My head drops forwards suddenly and I jerk upright again, peeking towards my captor, only to find him lying down with his eyes closed in sleep. A soft deepened purr rolls through him as he snores.

I should take this moment now, the thought registers briefly. I should try to escape whilst he was out for the count and I still had the opportunity. With a yawn, the urgency of it fades and exhaustion takes its place. My eyes flicker closed again and with little else to do, I succumb and join him into the realm of sleep.

My chance to run finally came first thing when the light of dawn arrived. Darvik had awoken first, drawing me from my dreams with his heavy about the cave. Through half-closed lids, I remain still, watching him, pretending to still sleep. He does not relight the fire; a sign that perhaps he intends to move on from this place to somewhere else. Once or twice, his head would come my way to look down at me. His massive shape and shadowed features give nothing away of his thoughts. His intense appraisal makes my skin prickle and it takes all my willpower to keep my breathing even. On edge, I wait for him to return to his task before peeking up at him again.

I'm surprised when he doesn't come over and attempt to waken me. I'm even more surprised when he strides towards the opening of the cave and heads straight out of it, not once glancing back to see if I'm following or still there.

He's gone. Just like that. He hasn't taken me with him or tied me down to prevent me from escaping. Perplexed, I frown and lay there, uncertain of what to do or what to think. I stare at the space where he'd disappeared through, half expecting him to return and come back for me.

But he doesn't.

Silence is my answer. He doesn't return at all. He's left me here, alone.

I lift up to my elbow as excitement pulses through me. This was it. This was my chance, my opportunity to get away. I had to act. *Now.*

Heart pounding, I shoot up from the ground, still crouched low as if expecting his huge self to come charging in from the shadows at any moment. My eyes fly this way and that, seeing only the gloom and the brightness of the jungle waiting beyond the open mouth of our dwelling.

Go, Lottie. Do it now! Go!

Instead of running, I creep forward carefully. Quietly. Licking my lips nervously, I plaster my back to the rocks, looking out at the vast world beyond. Trees surround me from all angles. Tall and short. Bright and dark. The grass under my feet prickles at my soles as I step out and glance in every direction, searching for any signs of danger or of the hunter who had taken me.

He's nowhere to be seen. In fact, the jungle is so eerily quiet it's unsettling and another shiver rolls down my spine ominously.

The wind, soft and ghostly, drifts across my cheeks in welcome. Something within urges me to start running, yet I find myself pausing. Something is off. Something doesn't seem right and I can't quite put my finger on what it is.

The eerie feeling of being watched only adds to the instinctive need for flight. Although I cannot see him, I know he's out there somewhere, lingering in the shadows. Waiting. Probably even watching me right now.

A few feet away, I notice a huge branch on the floor and dive forward for it. The thing is heavy in grip as I clasp its weight with both hands, ready to use it as a weapon should the need arise. I wander further forward, relaxing a little when nothing jumps out from the bushes to stop me. Nothing at all.

Cautious, I make it towards the thickening of trees and become lost within their depths. Their low hanging limbs close in around me like protective welcoming arms, hopefully covering me from obvious sight. My courage grows the longer I trudge through them, weaving this way and that.

I clambered through some bushes, whacking at them with my stick as the awful morning heat begins to lick at my skin and cause it to break out with sweat. If there was one thing I hated about this planet, it was the unpredictable and vastly changing weather. One minute it was deathly cold, the next unbearably hot.

I climb out of the gnarly thickets and find myself in a clearing of some sort. I edge further into it with a frown as a sense of déjà vu hits me. I've been here before, in this exact same spot too. I was sure of it. Have I been going in circles this entire time? I groan aloud and lift a free hand to rub at my forehead.

God, this place was seriously getting on my--

A loud crack sounds behind me and I freeze. Rustling follows and a lump of dread forms in my throat.

Someone is behind me. I can feel it.

A growl rumbles and a wave of goosebumps dance down my nape.

Ever so slowly, I turn my head towards the source of my newfound dread.

My eyes widen. My mind swings from confusion, to surprise and then to horror. Part of me had almost expected it to be the hunter, Darvik, following at my back. But it wasn't him. No, nothing could have prepared me for the *thing* now towering too close for my liking.

What the…

Two beady eyes roll and narrow on me. A long stick-like body bends, seeking to move closer. Absently, I take note of its gangly legs, managing to count six of them in total. Coloured all green, the humongous creature reminds me a lot of the those praying mantis insects we have back on Earth. Its antennae are as long as my hair and two dripping fangs wriggle beneath the curve of its non-existent jaw.

My mouth drops open and then in the next breath, I'm screaming.

Chapter 28

The insectoid rears back, startled at my cry, before suddenly shrieking back at me, spitting a spray yellowish gunk in the process.

I stumble away just as it lunges with those deadly curved fangs. Terrified, I scream again and whip my heavy stick towards its narrowed inhuman head with all the force I can muster.

My weapon slams into the giant bug hard. The rebound of it vibrates up my arm and, for an instant, I nearly drop it from the pain it causes. The *thing* chirps and snaps angrily. Its branch-like arms snap forward and I noticed, belatedly, when it nearly rips into my face, that each one is lined with rows of razor-sharp spines. It's easily twice the height of me, ridiculously tall and skinny. As a kid, I'd always been creeped out by various bugs and arachnids, and today was certainly no different.

Cringing, I nearly tripping over my own legs in my haste to get away from it. The creature launches forward, not once relenting in its attack. Raising my branch, I swing at it again, mostly out of blind panic. With a *thunk,* I smash it against the insect's skull, sending it toppling away with a yowl.

The thing – whatever the fuck it is – teeters and then shakes itself as though dizzy. Its beady black eyes find me again, emotionless and fixed with purpose. Its pincers click together with excitement.

"Get the hell away from me!" I strike out again, barely missing its side. I edge away, eager for some more space. One step, then two. My back then makes contact with the trunk of a large tree. "I mean it! I swear to god I'll bust your ugly ass head open if you…"

Clicking echoes from my left and I catch the flash of vibrant green as a second insect slinks in from the side, edging closer. I emit a shout, hoping the sound would deter it, but no such luck was on my side. These beings weren't afraid of me, not in the slightest.

With sheer terror, I cling to my weapon like it's a lifeline, holding it aloft. Whatever happened, I wouldn't go down without a fight. I didn't want to die like this; being eaten by giant insects that looked like Jiminy Cricket on steroids.

I press further into the tree behind me. What should I do? What could I? I didn't—

Chirping sounds echo, sounding far too close for comfort. The foliage above me rustles and I lift my head slowly to look up. The darkened leaves part and another one of their creepy-crawly friends comes climbing down the bark towards me.

Oh god… I'm going to die.

Once within range, its legs begin to lash down at me with swift deadly precision. I duck at the vital moment, hunkering low and out of reach. Every inch of my tremble as I curl into myself protectively. My arms lift, helpless. As one unit they all surge in for the final, fatal kill.

I scream again, loud and terrified…. And so does one of the massive bugs.

Through the haze of my panic, I realise that they're no longer looking at me but at something behind them. The one in front grunts as if pained.

And then I see it…

There's a crude spear protruding through its thorax, impaled clean half the way through. Rivulets of luminous fluid gushes from the now open wound there. The other two chirp and chatter, their noises angry as their legs quivers beneath their elongated bodies.

The speared one drops, falling to the ground in a deadened heap. As soon as it's gone from blocking my sight, I finally see the towering humanoid figure standing a short distance behind it.

Call me crazy, but for a wonderful heartbeat my mind is conjuring up my rescuer, telling me that I know his face. It's a hunter!

"Yaknaur!" I call out in pure happiness, a smile spreading across my face. My shoulders slump, relieved, only to then stiffen with disappointed as the Yautja prowls closer, the shadows sliding away from his being to reveal himself fully to me.

No. It's not Yakanur. Although he seems somewhat similar, this male is taller. Broader. More beastlier. Not at all like one of my own.

Darvik snarls, approaching slowly with all the confidence and arrogance of a king. His scaly brown skin all but gleams in the sunlight, iridescent in some places like glittering sand on a beach. His eyes – one startling white, one golden – slide from one creature to the other. Sizing them up. Choosing his next victim.

Chaos ensues then. The duo remaining leaps at their new opponent with vigour, slashing out and hacking at the air in a bid to render the small hunter into pieces. Considering his size, Darvik evades them with frightening ease, bending and curving his body in ways that should have been humanly impossible. His blackened mane spreads and flies like the wings of a raven. He dodges one strike and dives, rolling to the side, only to then surge up into a twist over one of the creatures heads.

Like… how the hell is he even doing that? Stunned, I sit there, shaking, watching the scene unfolding with a generous dose of awe.

"Look out! Behind you!" I yell as one tries to sneak up from behind.

Something whistles through the air, spinning and gleaming like silver; some kind of throwing dagger. It hits its target, piercing a vibrant green head like a needle through fabric. The creatures body slams down, defeated and still, leaving only one of them remaining.

The last is much taller than he is, yet Darvik surprises me further by lifting the creature up, full-bodied, over his head like a professional wrestler. With a victorious roar, he brings it down over his bent knee, causing its spine the crack loudly like splintering wood.

Ugh. Gross.

The thing shudders, emitting a gurgle, before falling slack in his hold.

It's not enough for him though. With dexterity, Darvik pulls on the insect's legs, one by one ripping them from its torso. The head is next, sending a spray of ghastly goo in all directions. Some of it sprays up his powerful chest, coating his skin like war paint.

Throwing his head back, he roars again, pleased with himself. Shoulders rolling, he rises to his feet and stares down at his conquered enemy with gleaming eyes, panting hard. He looks positively primitive and wild. Dangerous.

And then he turns to me…

Without a word, he comes at me, fixed with intent. He doesn't break his stride even when he steps over a fallen corpse and slips the dagger in his hand back into the strap on his thigh. If I was afraid before, it's nothing compared to now. It crosses my mind fleetingly to try and run but I knew it would be pointless. I didn't want to test that kind of bad luck again. I wouldn't stand a chance against someone like him.

My legs are folded beneath me, weak with shock as my adrenaline continues to surge through my blood like fire. As Darvik advances within reach, I try to stand, only to fall back on my butt again. My limbs are refusing to work or do anything.

I choke on a sound just as he pauses right in front of me. All power and strength, I can feel his presence like a massive cloud, threatening to swallow me up into its depths. His heavy, rasping breath makes the hair at my neck stand on end.

He's angry. He's going to kill me and probably it make a slow and painful death at that.

Although I can't see him, I sense him bending nearer and my shoulders hunch in defence, waiting for his fury.

"Good, female." He growls, taking me aback.

My eyes fly open and I frown up at him.

"Um… W-what?"

My stammer fades into muted shock as his hands grab at my waist. With frightening ease, he lifts my weight up and into his arms as if I'm nothing more than a child. Before I know it, I am once again thrown over a firm and solid shoulder. The world tilts until all I can see is the ground below me and the sweaty slope of his rippling back.

"Oh, please, no," I grumble, already squirming as the soreness in my ribs surges in complaint to the familiar position. "Not this again. Please, put me down!"

He ignores my plea and continues to walk. It dawns then that he doesn't seem in the least bit upset with me for running away. His gait is steady and sure, even somewhat upbeat like he's pleased with himself.

"Foolish *Vagi,*" His foreign curse is harsh and although I can't understand it, I recognise its tone as an insult of sorts. "Did you think you could escape me?"

Dangling back and forth, my hair tangles into my face.

"Yes," I mutter gloomily, slumping in defeat.

He snorts with mockery. "You *hooman's* are all the same. It is no wonder the *Critins* found you so easily." His claws dig into me as he adjusts me within his hold. "Without me, you would be dead."

"Well, Jeez," I mutter sarcastically. "My hero" I sigh. "Look. If you hate my kind so much then why did you follow me? You should have just let me die and saved yourself the hassle."

That wasn't entirely true, I realised. Deep down, I was somewhat glad he'd been there. And he was right. Without his help, I would have surely been eaten alive.

"I have a need for you yet, female. Do not doubt it," Darvik hisses, and some part of me registers a slither of amusement within his tone. "You have been most useful today."

Useful? My brows furrow at that. What was he talking about?

"What do you mean?" I ask.

His free arm rises, the muscles there bulging as he allows me to see the dripping legs of the *Critin* still in his hands. The broken things sway uselessly and I eye them with disgust.

"Now we have more food."

Food? I swallow as something foul creeps up into my throat. Was he being serious? Was he really planning to eat that thing? My stomach churns just thinking about it. There was no way on this godforsaken planet that I was going to join him in his feast. No, thank you.

"That's…" I try to find the words to describe my revulsion yet nothing could seem to do it justice. "How did you even know where to find me?"

He shrugs and I feel the movement against my midriff. "I hunted you." At my silence, he adds, "and then I hunted them."

His words repeat to me, heavy with some hidden meaning. As I pondered it further a horrible thought crossed my mind. I recalled the morning, waking up and him leaving without so much as a word. The way he'd left me there, unguarded, unwatched. As if knowing I would try to escape, knowing I would--

"Wait." I push up against his back, trying to somehow turn back to look at him over my shoulder. "You knew this would happen, didn't you?"

The more I considered it, the more it began to make sense. I hadn't been rescued at all. He'd planned this all along.

"You used me as bait."

He shrugs again, as though it's of no consequence to him. "It is the way of things."

Fury surges and all I want to do is lash out at him. I desperately wanted a knife so that I stab it deep into his shoulder like a psycho. This hunter was the worst of their kind. He truly cared about nothing or no one and was willing to risk anything to get what he wanted.

I could have died. I could have been eaten… Worst still, my child could have been hurt too.

"You're a monster," I rasp, feeling more insecure and vulnerable than ever before.

He grunts as if to agree. "Darvik, I am called," he preens with pride, jumping lightly across a fallen log. "It means '*he who shall not bow or kneel."* His grip on me tightens in threat, making his meaning clear. "I follow no one. And if I say to *stay*, you shall *stay.* If I say to move, you shall move. You belong to me now and must learn to obey me, lest you wish to meet your end sooner than intended."

I shudder against him, fear returning like a creeping vine around my chest.

"I won't," I whisper, trying to sound more courageous than I felt.

He was pretty much spelling it out to me now; that whatever he had planned, it would end in my death. He was using me for one reason or another; I just didn't know as to what or why yet. I knew his kind and their culture well enough by now to understand that harming a pregnant female was considered dishonourable. Yet he didn't seem to care in the slightest.

"Why are you doing this? I am not your enemy. I was even stupid enough to set you free and help you escape!" My voice starts to rise in pitch as a strange panic rides into me like a wave. Without thinking, I lash out, striking at his rigid back with my fist. "You're not a *true* hunter!" I hit him again, harder. "You're just an animal! You have *no honour*, you--!"

"Enough!"

His snarl is guttural and deep like thunder. He pauses mid-stride and I feel something latch around the flesh of my right thigh, sinking in deep, almost to the point of bruising pain. As soon at its there, it's gone again, leaving a tender ache in its wake.

Did he just… *bite me?*

"You shall be silent." His growl vibrates through us both and I shiver at the danger in it. "Or I will *force* you to be silent. Make your choice now, *hooman*."

I bite my lip, choking back my sobs as frustrated tears bloom and blur within my vision. I slump again against him, surrendering to the misery that's now taking a firm hold. I sniffle and try to wipe at my cheeks awkwardly while hanging upside down. One urgent thought

comes to me then, coming from deep within my soul like a silent cry to the vast world beyond.

Memnis.

Yaknaur.

Sin’Chila.

Where are you?

Chapter 29

Darvik's POV

Night has settled again and the makeshift camp he had managed to wrangle together from bark and leaves is enough to keep some of the cold at bay, though not entirely. Throwing another branch upon his fire, Darvik spears a glance towards the female laid nearby. The flames are loud and bright, flickering harshly in the darkness. If any predators were to linger nearby in these wilds he knew for sure they would be able to see their position. Foolish though it was, it was for the female's sake that he had relented and allowed such a luxury – even as he loathed to admit the notion to himself. Shaking his head, he grunts lowly, turning away from her to rid himself of her tiny shape.

No, he repeated it with certainty. With the swift dropping of the evening heat, she would surely perish under the attack of the cold. She was too little and her hide too thin – not like his own - to protect her against the elements. If he had not acted, she would have faded fast; something that he could not allow to happen. At least not until his mission was accomplished.

In truth, it mattered little to him if others found them here. He was, after all, as strong and as capable as any other beasts that roamed these lands. There wouldn't many who would take the risk to attack them now with a full-grown Yautja male on the watch.

Alert, the wind howls around them, causing the foliage of their crude den to rustle and creak under its strain. Somewhere in the distance thunder rolls and the glow of the moons are barely seen through the thickness of the clouds above. Like two silver eyes, they peer back at him and a hollow feeling strikes at his breast. The creatures of the jungle lay quiet and still, almost as if holding their breath at his presence. So many times he'd sat and stared into the darkness like this, simply basking in the silence that was both his greatest and most hated companion.

A memory surges then…

The rain pelts at him from all sides, drenching him to the bone. His small frame trembles as he crouches there and watches the other younglings from his hiding place amongst the bushes. With curious young eyes, he observes them as they frolic around in the mud, envious of their games. For so long he had longed for a playmate of his own, and perhaps even a tribe to welcome him into their circle.

Darvik's eyes cast to the large male guarding over them protectively and a false sense of hope teases at him, lending him foolish courage.

Slinking forward, something cracks beneath Darvik's feet. The towering hunter spins, his keen eyes finding him within the shadows. Pure fury splits his mandibles and, without pause, he roars and pulls forth a blade from his gauntlet, heading straight towards his sanctuary.

Sheer fear grips him, his folly realised. Everyone, including he, knew that to tread into another Yautja's territory was a great offence, one that warranted even death. Young or not, this hunter would attempt to kill him. There would be no mercy from any of them. He was a trespasser here. Unwanted and unwelcome.

The male stomps closer, hissing out in warning. The weapon on his massive arm glints, his eyes thirsty for blood.

Instinct surges, and without looking back, Darvik lunges away, fleeing from the camp like a pup with its tail tucked.

There was no place for him here… There was no place for him anywhere, it would seem.

"Memnis."

A soft voice pulls him from his thoughts and Darvik turns to the little female again. In sleep, she shifts, rolling to her side as though unconsciously seeking the fire's warmth, even in dreams. For most of their entire journey, she had been sullen and as still as a corpse across his shoulder, making not the slightest of sounds. Her fight had long since died out since the attack by the Critins. As soon as Darvik had settled them down to camp she had curled up into her space, sparing him no focus. Quiet and submissive. And it wasn't until she'd succumb to her weariness that he had taken the opportunity to openly observe her strangeness.

Small, yes. So small that she felt like a youngling within his arms. Her pale skin almost glowed in the moonlight and the length of her tussled mane was a mixture between blood and darkened earth.

With a low moan, she moves again and he receives an open view of her alien smooth face. *Such a peculiar thing*. Intrigued, he drops the stick in his hands and leans forward against his knees, peering at each slope and curve of it. Unlike his own, her jaw is solid, with pinkened plump flesh for what he assumed was her mouth. His own splays and his mandibles work as though trying to understand its design. Her teeth, he knew, were blunt white rows; not at all dangerous enough to make any potential damage. Her eyes, when open, were always wide when they beheld him; her fear of him clear.

"Mem…nis," she utters again, a whimpering noise coming from her throat as if in distress.

Tilting his head, his mottled brow deepens into a frown. Memmisk? He did not know this word, it was unfamiliar to him. Why did she keep saying it? Perhaps it had some kind of meaning in her *hooman* tongue.

A slender arm snakes up as her clawless fingers reach for her throat. The curves of her chest dip and expand with increasing pants. The soft globes move and it is then that he sees the pointed tips of her teats through the hide of her clothing. She mumbles again, whispering for some unknown saviour, her tone heavy with pleading. She whines and her hips writhe.

With a sharp inhale, more out of surprise than anything, he gets a whiff of something perfuming through the air. Something fragrant and somewhat… *pleasing*.

A low noise rumbles through him unbidden. Rising to his towering height, he stares down at her for a beat in a mixture of revulsion and curiosity. The more he drags that sweetened scent into his lungs the more the growing ache between his thighs pounded at him. Insistent and needy. Troubled, he glares at her, equally as angry with himself for such weakness.

What sort of black magic was this?

The female keens again and it dawns on him then that this might be the name of her male. She is calling for him.

With a sneer, he rears back, only to step forward again, torn with what to do. A dark need curls through him, venomous with its intent.

Why? He thought to himself suddenly, his displeasure strengthening. Why did she call for him? Even now, if given the chance, she would probably flee back to his side, anything to get away from the unworthy hunter now keeping her. She was loyal, he could say that at least. Determined too for one so weak.

So then, why hadn't her mate come for her yet? Was he cowardly? Too afraid to face Darvik for the safety of his female? Darvik snorted at the idea. This female was surely of great value to his new adversary; after all, she carried his young within her womb.

And yet, despite this, he felt something unpleasant burning through his blood like a fire. It had been such a long time since he had experienced the sting of rejection from another. Yet even now he recognised its presence like a bad taste still lingering within his mouth.

This female… she yearned for her true mate. Dreamt of him. But was it not *he* – Darvik - that had provided the fire for her? That had protected her from the *Critins*? That had kept her alive all this time? Surely, she would have perished without him at her side. It was he who deserved her loyalty and gratitude, not this phantom male who hadn't the guts nor ability to defend her.

Since his birthing, Darvik had never interacted with many females – Yautja or otherwise. He knew nothing of their minds or needs. His solitary existence had left little chances for mating or seeking out companionship.

What would it be like? He wondered. To have a female of his own. To keep her. To provide for both her and their future young. Solemn, his eyes trail down the *hooman's* body, hovering over her middle. He lowers, dropping soundlessly to his knees by the female's form. Her thigh moves, brushing against his lightly, taking him aback by the fleeting contact.

"Memnis…" Her head tosses across the leaves, her calls breathless. "Where are you?"

That aching temptation consumes him and without thinking, Darvik bends over her, planting his palms either side of her small head. His claws dig deep as his breath breezes against her face. Taking the moment, he inhales so deeply until he can almost taste her.

When her tiny hand comes up and finds his chest, it takes every ounce of his control not to growl. Her paw is warm, sliding against the slope of his breast in a gesture he could only

describe as *welcoming*. His *cros* hardens with a swiftness that forces the very wind from his lungs.

“You’re here.”

Her face turns and before Darvik can prevent it, her cheek brushes against his thickened one, nuzzling against him like a *felina* in heat. Heat spears through his entire frame, consuming with its fierceness. His own eyes flutter, almost closing at the sensations her feather-light touches provoke.

A rumbling surges up through his throat, surprising even to himself. Never before had he felt the need, nor had the reason, to emit such sounds before. *Until now*. Surrendering to them, his purrs grow deeper and loud enough that the female beneath him begins to stir into wakefulness.

Her eyes open and then widen, meeting his. Her gasp hits him. She stiffens and the hand at his chest freezes in its journey against his flesh. His insides jar as the world around him seems to fade away, leaving nothing remaining… only the *hooman*.

Something within stirs, calling to her within the silence. Shifting and restless.

All other thoughts trail away, leaving only one remaining, and the truth of it strikes him hard.

He wants her… He wants this female for his own.

His blood rushes hotly with the need to rut. To breed. Every inch of him hardens in response. Encouraged by her stillness, he rises back onto his knees with purpose. His chest expands in a gesture as old as time itself. Breathing hard, he reaches down and begins to untie the fastening to his coverings…

Oh god.

Oh god. Oh god. Oh my fucking god.

I can’t believe this is happening. It couldn’t be. It shouldn’t.

I had been dreaming of my hunters, I knew that clearly enough, even now. Everything had seemed so real. I had almost felt their skin, heard their purrs, sensed their presences nearby. But something had woken me. And now, I was quickly coming to the realisation that the sensations I had been feeling in my sleep were in fact very real.

Darvik leans over me, his huge body like a cave, blotting out all sight and light, leaving me with no choice but to lay there and stare up at him in a mixture between horror and awe. As though burnt, I drop my hand, which had somehow been touching him. I try and move away for some distance but the ground is at my back. His muscular arms are a cage around me, pinning me beneath him. There is nowhere to go, no way of escaping.

His mottled brow deepens, as does the intensity of his inhuman eyes in the gloom. His purr is low and trembling like gentle waters cascading over a gathering of rocks.

“Female…” His breath is warm, gliding against my cheek. My eyelashes flutter at his nearness and I can scarcely draw in air. He inhales deeply, tilting his head a little and causing a ropey lock to slide against my shoulder. “You are… in need.”

Um… What?

I can’t even find logical thought let alone speak. Before I can utter a single sound, he rises to his knees and starts to reach for his loincloth. Any contentment or arousal I had remaining from my dream soon disappears like the sun behind an enormous stormy cloud.

“Wait,” I start to utter, slamming into full awakeness. “What are you--”

The covering is pulled away and I drop into a stunned silence as he bears his naked groin to me in all its alien glory. His chest puffs out proudly, his hips thrusting forward in an attempt to draw my attention to his dick. He’s displaying himself to me. Posturing. And oh my good god… that thing is *huge.*

I can’t help myself; I find myself staring at it. The shaft is long and thick. The swollen purpled tip is seeping and straining against the upper part of his abdomen. Silvery veins weave down its length, throbbing and dancing with a mystical light. The balls below it are heavy and tight, the skin much darker than the rest of his genitalia.

Confused, and with a large dose alarm, I lift a knee up as though it would somehow become a trusty barrier between us. He reaches down and grabs for it, glaring darkly, and it takes every fibre of my being not to yelp out in fear. His touch is like a brand. Burning. I must have let a noise slip out, as Darvik freezes and his frown hardens, causing the lines of his scars to tighten with clear displeasure.

Something in his mangled expression causes me to double-take. He’s looking at me so openly, almost *humanly*. His mismatched eyes slide over my face, taking in everything, reading me closely. His mouth flutters for a moment, the strong lines of his mandibles working as though uncertain.

“Darvik,” I say his name slowly, hoping to reach through to him. My voice quivers, quiet, yet my unease can be heard as loudly as the wind beyond our nest.

I eye his cock again, noticing how the head dribbles a little with creamy fluid. I lick at my lips, nervous.

“You are in need,” he repeats, rasping the statement as if it should somehow make sense of this entire situation. “I…” he starts again with a small hint of hesitance. “*I* will serve you, female.”

“No.” It flies out before I can stop it.

Anger creeps across his face as he shifts away and his eyes flash like two burning coals in a fire. “You deny me?”

“I… belong to another,” I answer honestly, stammering with some fear of how he’d react. “I don’t need you to *serve* me. Not now...Not ever.” I add the last bit with some bite, trying to gather my courage.

It was one thing to take me a captive, but there was no way in hell that I was going to go along with this. I would be lying if I were to say he didn’t appeal to me. His body was as strong and powerful as a bull. Everything about him reminded me of my males. His appearance. His mannerisms. But this hunter was not mine. I didn’t know or trust him.

I flinch as he reaches forward again. His claw fingers snag around my leg as he all but drags me further under him, practically straddling himself over me.

“No!” I push out against him and try to free my trapped limbs. I wiggle and struggle as sheer panic chokes in my throat. “Wait! Darvik! You can’t do this!”

He freezes. Noticing my fearful reaction, he suddenly sneers and swiftly retreats again, throwing out a huff of impatience. His chest and shoulders flex, the muscles tightening restlessly.

“I smell your arousal, female. Do not lie. You crave to mate.”

“But not with you,” I gush, sucking in a breath afterwards. My entire length stiffens, pressing further back into the crispy leaves below me. The air around us is so taut like a tightly pulled thread, threatening to snap.

Darvik jerks at that as though I’ve physically slapped him. I can see his frustration all but gleaming from every line of his body. The silence that follows is deafening.

“You find me unworthy?”

I blink. Something in me softens. I don’t know why but I feel kinda bad for him. Don’t ask me why; it’s not like I owed him anything. After all, he’s the one who had taken me from the ship. He’d done nothing but throw out threats since arriving here. I had every right to say no to him. But in all honesty, it wasn’t his offer of *service* that was taking me aback. It was his reaction.

I was nothing more than a human to him. Tiny and weak. He could have easily overpowered me by now if he’d chosen to do so. Yet he hadn’t. Even now, despite his obvious anger at my denying him, he was keeping his temper in check; which was both odd and a relief. A Yautja hunter took what he wanted most of the time. They did not ask for permission or seek approval from others. In the views of his people, I was now his property, to do with as he pleased.

Yet, he hesitates… he’s actually listening to me, and even seems… *offended?*

“It’s not that,” I speak again in a whisper, the words sticking like glue within my mouth. “Please, understand…”

I don’t know how to express to him that I don’t want him without hurting his feelings, or worse, making him more pissed off than he already is.

He huffs then and his entire demeanour deflates. The blackness of his mane sways as he turns away as though the sight of me is something unpleasant. The tension whizzing between us lessens, fading slowly like a phantom.

Of all the things I’d expected - anger, perhaps even violence - his almost instantaneous submission was startling, to say the least.

Without a word, he rises to his feet and recovers himself. He edges towards the fire, giving me a view of his powerful back as he lowers to sit before it. A low sound comes from his throat and I recognise it as a sigh, low and plaintiff; a noise I hadn’t really heard a hunter make before.

Head lowered, he stares into the flames. I can’t see his features, but I can tell his mood has shifted from one extreme to another. He seems as gloomy as a tombstone.

Glad to have my personal space back, I rise up onto an elbow and stare at him, perplexed and intrigued all at once. He’s not going to attack me. He’s not going to lash out or force me into accepting him. That realisation alone is staggering.

“This male of yours,” he speaks suddenly, breaking the pensive silence. “You have chosen him?”

“I have,” I utter the reply.

He huffs again, although it sounds more like a snort of derision. “And yet, he is not here.” He mocks, giving me a brief view of his bulky profile as he turns his head. “Do you choose him still?”

I take a moment, feeling somewhat anxious about how to respond. “I do.”

He mumbles something, probably a snarky remark of some kind. His crocodile-like tail whips back and forth across the ground behind him like an agitated cat’s.

I half-expected him to retort with another mean comment, but his next words surprise me. “Then your mate is fortunate indeed… to have such a loyal female.”

My insides twist as a strange lump forms in my throat. If anyone was fortunate, it was me. I had three amazing hunters who I adored more than life itself. I missed them with every inch of my being. My loyalty to them didn’t come from duty or necessity. It came from a pure love for them. Always.

He says the word *mate*, singular, not plural, but I don’t attempt to correct him on the error.

Battling against the awkwardness, I sit there quietly. The fire crackles as I watch him for a beat. He busies himself with some food, sliding a slimy-looking chunk of bug onto the end of a stick before hovering it over the fire to cook. It sizzles noisily and I try not to cringe. Yet as the minutes pass a soft aroma starts to filter through the air. Despite how gross that creature – the critin? - had been, it was now starting to smell delicious. Like roast pork. Mmm.

"Darvik," I start carefully, "Where are your family? Your clan? Have you no kin at all?" I choose the words my hunters had used to refer to one another, hoping he'd understand my line of questioning.

He pauses, then shakes his head slowly, shrugging as though it was of no importance.

"Nej." *No.* "I have no one. I am, as they say, one of the *Vindas*."

I frown, having not heard this phrase before. "What does that mean?"

He takes a while to answer and I think for a second that he won't, until he finally speaks. "It means *wanderer*. One whom is unwelcome."

Sadness for him surges through me. God, I hated being so sensitive all the time towards others; it was both my blessing and my curse. I couldn't help but think about how that must feel, to be labelled as something unwanted by your own species. All sentient creatures liked company and wanted to bond with others. It was part of nature. The Yautja, in their own way, were no different. Even for someone as hardened as Darvik, it must have been difficult for him. I mean, sure, he could be a complete asshole most the time, and had nearly scared me half to death on multiple occasions, but still…

He did have some honour, despite how he portrayed himself. And he did have somewhat of functional moral compass too.

"I'm sorry." Again, I don't know what to say. He didn't seem the sort to want something as weak as sympathy or compassion, but I gave it to him nonetheless.

The large dome of his skull inclines. Although he doesn't speak again, it's clear he's never heard this phrase before. With a grunt, he refocusses on his task and pretty much dismisses any of my further attempts at conversation.

With a wave of relief, I lower back towards my makeshift bed. The soft sounds of the fire and the heady scent of the food causes my belly to grumble loudly. I place my hand against it and rub it soothingly, staring up at the leafy ceiling with deepening thought.

I couldn't wait to see my hunters again. Somehow, deep down, I knew they would eventually come for me. Maybe not today, or even any time soon, but eventually they would. My heart told me so. I had to cling to that hope and keep going for them. If only I could--

Something hits and bounces against the side of my leg and I look down to find a steaming piece of bug leg – now a crispy brown – sitting next to my thigh. I reach down for it and try to force the image of the creature from earlier on from my mind. I glance towards Darvik,

uncertain. He turns away before I can get a good look at his expression. His arm lifts, waving dismissively for me to take the offering.

He doesn't say anything and I dare to allow my lips to curve up into the smallest of smiles. For a big frightening beast, he's acting like a sulky child, yet at the same time willing to share some of his grub with me.

A good hint of progress if ever I saw one.

"Thank you."

He snorts roughly as though my gratitude is unwelcome, not sparing me a single glance.

Fighting back my disgust, my hunger takes charge, and without further ado, I bite into the chunk of meat, savouring the salty crunch of it. Its hard and strange but had to admit that it wasn't so bad as I feared it would be.

My eyes slide towards Darviks massive back again, my smile growing.

Yep. Perhaps not so bad after all.

Chapter 30

For what seems like the trillionth time within a single hour, I stumble another step and curse aloud at the huge root of a tree that had dared to try and trip me up. I lash out and give it a brief kick for good measure.

“I’m really starting to hate this place,” I say to myself with a huff.

I’m done; on the brink of losing my mind. The heat of the jungle is killing me and the morning sun is once again burning high in the pinken sky above us. The moment Darvik had nudged me awake and told me to get up, I knew it was going to be a bad day. I didn’t eat any of the food he tossed my way, unlike last night. I didn’t feel right at all. My head was pounding like I had snow white and her sevens dwarves mining away at my last shred of patience. My stomach rolls, but not with hunger. The nausea I’m feeling goes straight through me, making me want to dive into a bush and heave my guts up.

My irritation is obvious, I can tell. Even Darvik – who silently leads the way in front of me – keeps turning back, tossing me the odd scowl.

In all honesty, I couldn’t exactly say what was wrong with me. Maybe it was this ridiculous humidity? Maybe it was a symptom of my pregnancy? I dunno. All I knew was that I was fed up, ready to throw my dummy out of the pushchair at any moment and scream at the world for all its unfairness lately.

I hardly speak to Darvik, nor he to me. After our little *misunderstanding* yesterday I felt like things had taken a turn between us, both in a good way and somewhat bad. He wasn’t carrying me about like usual. Considering I was unbound and left unsupervised, I half considered trying to make a mad dash away from him, but then decided against it. 1 – because he’d probably only catch up with me anyway. And 2 – I really couldn’t be bothered. All of my energy was zapped, non-existent to the point that all I wanted to do was curl up against a tree somewhere and sleep for an age.

Trudging behind the massive hunter, I glare at his powerful back. Despite being so huge, he always moved easily and with little struggle or weariness; which only made me want to throw a rock at him. Sometimes it sucked being a human.

Wiping at my sweaty brow, I try to imagine myself back on Earth having a nice cool shower. Maybe even eating a big tub of Ben and Jerry’s ice cream. On the plus side, now that I was pregnant, at least I didn’t have to worry about having a period for a while. When the last one had come I’d had to suffer the indignity of using leaves as a makeshift pad – which really was as a horrible as it sounded. Right now, I would have been willing to sever my own arm off just for some shampoo and a razor to shave with. My legs were starting to look like they belonged to a woolly mammoth down there. Not classy at all.

I clamber over the next fallen log with some difficulty. I tread on something and it snaps loudly. Darvik briefly glances back to me again and I catch the flash of his mismatches eyes.

We must be swift and as silent as the wind, he'd grumbled to me earlier on. Yeah, good luck with that one. The only thing that was 'swiftly' doing anything was my mood going downhill.

He spreads his mandibles as if irritated and I can't fight back the urge to roll my eyes at him. With a grunt, he spins forward again and carries on.

My legs burn as I try to match his pace. Every one of his long strides requires at least three from me to keep up with him. I suck in air like its gold, precious and scarce. I lift one hand and waft my shirt to encourage some cool air to circulate against my skin. I place the other over my belly as it rolls again and I sigh as a memory comes to me…

I remember it like it was yesterday; such a tiny insignificant moment, but one I'd never forgotten about. It was a night Jason and I had been invited over for a get-together at a friends house. I hadn't known them personally at the time, but Jason had been close to the couple since his high school years.

I recalled sitting on their faded green sofa whilst Jason was in the kitchen talking to his friend, George. His beautiful wife, Lisa, had just had a baby and was preening with pride as she sat next to me, allowing me to see her.

"*Would you like to hold her?" She'd asked, all smiles and politeness.*

Despite the fact I barely knew her, I'd appreciated her trusting nature in allowing me to touch her newborn.

Though anxious and unsure, I'd nodded, welcoming the babe to me, only to then feel a surge of wondrous awe.

I'd never held a baby before; it had been my first time. The tiny thing had been warm against my chest, filling me with a strange need, both empty and wistful. Brilliant wide blue eyes had stared up at me and the entire world had seemed to fade away in an instant.

She had been so beautiful to touch, so tiny and wonderful. Yet, at the same time, a great sadness had choked at me, nearly bringing tears to my eyes. For at the time, I'd been broken, unable to have children of my own. At the time, I knew this kind of life would never be for me. I would never know the feeling of holding my own baby in my arms, nor smelling their soft head and knowing that deep bond that only a mother could share with her child.

That is until now...

My life had certainly taken a huge turn since then and was going to continue to drastically change from here on out. I had no idea of how to be a parent and I highly doubted they had alien midwives here to help with any of the birthing process. Most of it I would have to learn by myself; which was downright terrifying, to say the least. My quiet pride was unshakable, but I needed my hunters. I needed to find a way back to them and at least be somewhere safe for when--

My foot smashes against something and I'm falling before I can realise what's happening. I drop to the mossy ground with an *oomph.* My knee jars, as do my palms as I attempt to brace against the impact.

"Argh!" I bellow, blowing a lock of hair away from my overheated cheeks. "You know what? I'm so done with this shit!"

I rise sharply, slapping at my legs to clear them of dirt. "Fuck this planet. Fuck you!" I point to the rock that had caused my clumsiness. The overbearing heat is getting to me and I'm starting to lose my sanity. "Fuck this rock! And fuck these trees!"An unknown creature caws from the treetops as though laughing at me. I turn towards its direction and shout, "And fuck you as well!"

My voice echoes, bouncing all around us like the tolling of a bell. A flock of birds fly up into the sky, screeching in panic to my noise. Breathing in, I calm myself, turning slowly to follow after the Yautja, only to find him standing a few metres away already glaring at me. His look is venomous. He'd already gestured a handful of times before for me to be quieter.

Ok. So, maybe that outburst wasn't such a good idea.

I don't get the chance to speak as he suddenly strides towards me. His massive self stomps closer, almost intimating with his ferocious intent. Fear slashes at me as I rear back, trying to retreat away from his angry expression. If his demeanour is anything to go by, he looks ready to commit murder.

"I-I'm sorry!" I stammer, still trying to scoot away from him. My back slams into a tree, hard, stopping me in my tracks. "I'm *really* sorry. I'm not doing this on purpose, I swear." I gush as sheer panic takes hold. I flinch, bracing expectantly for his angry attack. Before I know it he's towering over me, all muscle and strength. "I'm just getting tired and this heat is- Wait! Hey!"

Clawed hands grab me. With frightening ease, he lifts me up like I'm nothing more than a small bag of potatoes. Hefting me up into his thick arms, he doesn't sling my over his shoulder this time; which is a surprise. Instead, he carries me close to his shoulder, like one would a child. He's that incredibly strong that he only needs one arm to hold me up.

Up close now, I hold my breath and stare at his face, which is now within inches of mine. His sneer is one of impatience, causing the various puckers scars across his skin to move and tighten. The one across his whitened eye, in particular, looks the nastiest. I stiffen, unable to look away from it. His breath hits my face but it doesn't smell unpleasant. In fact, considering how beastly he looked, he smelt pretty decent. Like moistened earth and something wild. Something definitely male.

I realise belatedly that his expression has softened. He's observing me just as closely as I am him. His eyes, strange and mismatched, cruise over my features and hair with keen interest.

I must have made a sound, a soft gasp, as he suddenly snaps back to focus and grunts at me. His arm tightens, stilling my squirms. The thick length of his tail joins against my waist, wrapping against me there like a heavy python.

“Foolish creature,” he growls, his clicks fast and low, vibrating straight through me. “For all your smallness you have no sense of stealth. It’s no wonder your mate does not come for you, you make too much noise.”

I open my mouth, about to snap something back, but then freeze when we both hear something crack from within the shadows of the trees beside us. Darvik’s head whips to it, as does mine. I clutch at his shoulder as a sudden sense of being watched follows. My skin prickles as all my senses careen together, trying to tell me something.

“What was that?” I whisper, more to myself than to him.

He growls lowly, ignoring my question. Clutching me closer, he starts to carry me with swiftness further through the foliage. Leaves and branches whip as us as we go and all I can do it hold onto him. In a way, I was kind grateful for the fact he was carrying me; at least my legs were able to rest after all the walking we’d done most the morning.

For what seems like an hour or so, he leaps through the undergrowth, pausing and sniffing at the air occasionally like a dog on the hunt. At one point, he pauses near a bush, picking a handful of berries and passing them to me, all the while scanning his surroundings and starting up again in his hurried pace. I chew on each one, cringing at their tartness. At least it was something, I thought. The fact he’d even bothered to stop to feed me was a surprise in itself.

Growing tired and somewhat bored, I lean into him, resting my head against his shoulder. His muscular body is as taut as bowstring against me, hard and unforgiving as stone. The thickness of his dreadlock-like hair skims against my knuckles as he turns to peer into the trees. His skin is slick, somewhat oily and as dark as burnished copper. Without thought, my fingers skim over a roughened patch that lines over the slope of his collarbone. The flesh there is textured yet soft like leather, reminding me of the scales of a snake.

At my touch, he staggers in his step, drawing to an abrupt halt. I sit upright and snap my hand back, throwing him an apologetic yet sheepish wince.

“Sorry, my bad.”

The colours of his eyes are startling, burning right into me like two flames; fire and ice combined. The tusks of his mandibles clatter together as he lifts a mottled brow at me. A head tilt follows. He seems almost… *curious.*

Once again his focus falls to my hair and I try not to flinch as his free hand comes up to reach for it. He clumsily grabs for a lock, dragging it gently out to feel it against his thickened fingertips. Despite having his razor-sharp claws so close to my skin, he’s actually being very gentle about it.

“*Taz’arin,*” he rumbles it in a near whisper.

I frown and swallow thickly, feeling myself stiffen like a board against him.

“What does that mea--?” I don’t get to finish my question.

Something cracks again from nearby, only louder and closer this time. I catch the hint of shapes from within the shadows to our left. My heart leaps as the foliage their rustles, slowly parting. Something silvery glints and reflects the sunlight directly into my eyes, blinding me for a moment.

A chorus of low threatening growls all but swamp around us like the rolling of thunder. The things that had been following us finally stalk forward and reveal themselves. Three massive male figures stride closer, claws clacking, muscled chests flexing in preparation for the coming fight. Three four-legged companions follow at their heels, snarling and snapping with vicious intent.

I recognise them instantly and my hope surges, bringing a massive grin to my face.

"*Chakria.*" One of them purrs to me and I feel a desperate shudder wrack down my spine.

They're here. It's all I can think as they draw to silent stop, forming a semi-circle around us.

Memnis' jaws splay wide in aggression as he takes up position to our right. For an instant, his glowing yellow eyes cast to me in obvious concern. Yaknaur drops to a crouch to our left, the blades in his hands gleaming like silver. Sin'Chila comes up between them, pausing his giant self a short distance away, his expression is icy and yet hungry for violence.

He reaches down and pulls out his spear. With a swift motion, he slams it to the ground, causing it to lengthen and crackle with blue-ish thrumming light. His entire being expands before my very eyes with growing threat.

His lethal eyes slide to me, burning bright, before sliding back to his new enemy. Darvik.

"Give us the female," he hisses with a snap of his jaws, "and we will make your passing a swift and painless one."

Chapter 31

They'll kill him.

It's the first thing that springs to mind as I sit there perched within Darvik's arms, watching as my hunter mates prowl forward with bloodthirst and violence in their eyes. My gaze slides over each of them in turn. First to Yaknaur, who stands strong and steady, visibly preparing for the fight that would inevitably come. Then to Sin'Chila, who leads the trio with his weapon at the ready and a cunning gleam in the depths of his sunken eyes. They trail over their new adversary, weighing him up, evaluating his strength and weaknesses. Finally, I look to Memnis, who is quietly fixed on me. Although he does not speak, I can sense his unease. His frown is troubled as his mandibles flex and flare with restlessness. I try and flash him a reassuring smile and he nods back slowly but it doesn't seem to settle him at all. If anything, I notice his claws flexing as he circles further around to the side of us, attempting to use the shadows there to slip into Darvik's blind spot.

"This is your last chance," Sin'Chila warns, baring the inside of his fleshy mouth. He draws the tip of his spear higher, pointing it towards us with clear intent. "The female. *Now*... or *your head*… make a choice!"

Out of nervousness, my grip on Darvik's shoulder tightens. In response, his embrace firms and his tail all but chains me to his torso. Its long length is thick and heavy, nearly constricting the very air from my lungs. Something sharp digs into my thigh; his claws. They don't pierce the skin but its enough to make me very aware of where they are on my person.

"Darvik…" I lick my lips anxiously, never taking my gaze from Sin'Chila who is waiting for the other hunter's response with barely contained impatience. "You must listen to me," I whisper to him. "They mean what they say. You have to--"

"I will give you *nothing,*" Darvik growls back, cutting me off. He slinks back, putting some distance between us and the three males, all the while clutching me harder to him, unwilling to relinquish me to them.

Memnis and Yaknaur move into the corner of my vision, creeping closer. Whether Darvik knows of their approach, I didn't know, but *I* certainly did. My skin crawls uneasily as they prowl nearer, the tension becoming absolute torture. I want nothing more than to shove away from my captor and run to them, yet at the same time, I could already sense that it was too late to prevent any violence from occurring. All it would take is one wrong move and all of hell would be unleashed. These males were out for blood and I only hoped that I wouldn't get caught in it. Darvik was making it very clear that he had no intention of letting me go or even putting me down.

With my dread climbing, I glance to Memnis, beseeching to him with my eyes alone.

I don't know what to do. I'm so on edge that I can scarcely draw breath. My entire frame locks. Waiting.

A long moment passes, horribly tight, thick with so much fury and hatred that I can almost taste it.

“I answer to no one.” It rumbles through me as Darvik retorts. And then, as if to make things a million times worse, he says to them. “Least of all to weakling *Ser’al’ak* like you.”

I have no idea of what he’d just called them, but going by Yaknaur’s swiftly darkening expression, it wasn’t anything polite.

“Don’t!” I shout and start to wriggle my way free. I had to do something. I had to at least try and calm them all down before someone got hurt. “Please, don’t fight! This isn’t—Ugh!”

The tail around my midriff constricts and I choke on my words. If at all possible, Darvik is squeezing me for dear life, nearly to the point of pain. Just when I think he’s about to snap at me for interfering, his face turns into my hair, burrowing there. I stiffen, even as a chorus of displeased hisses rise up around us.

I suck in air and then gasp when I realise he’s not hurting me at all. In fact, his behaviour is bordering on the brink between being possessive and protective. His jaws expand and comb through my hair in a common gesture of comfort. Coming from him, the behaviour is strange and foreign. His trill is low as if sensing my fear and wanting to soothe me.

“Be easy, *Taz’arin*.” There it was again; that nickname he keeps calling me. His breath breezes against my hair and cheeks, causing my eyelashes to flutter at his closeness. “I will not allow them to harm you.”

His words both surprise and unsettle me.

“They’re not trying to hurt me!” I spin to him and push against his chest. “I know these males. Please! You need to put me down. They’ll kill you if you don’t!”

Could he not see how dangerous this situation was going to get? The fact that Sin’Chila was even allowing him a chance to peacefully let me go was astounding, to say the least. If Darvik hesitated for much longer, I doubted very much that he’d continue to allow such a small mercy.

“Hush… Fear not.” Darvik says, not yet looking away from the foe now gathering around him. “I am stronger than you think. I will not lose. I *never* lose...I can take them.”

What? His arrogance is staggering, to the point where I almost laugh. Was he being serious? Big as he may be, there were three Daku hounds and three very pissed off Yautja hunters to contend with. He couldn’t win this fight; it was impossible. Madness, even.

He completely ignores my pleas and takes a moment to snarl at a hound who has wandered too close to his left. The four-legged beast emits a hiss, its long tongue sliding out to taste the air. The quills on its back ripple as it hunkers down, preparing to charge.

Darvik snaps out his free arm and two long blades dispatch from his wrist gauntlet; reminding me of that character from the Xmen movies – Wolverine. Their serrated edges

gleam as he holds them up in front of us, his meaning clear; *come any closer and you'll get your face shredded.*

What he says next stuns us all.

"The *hooman* is *mine."* The entire world around us seems to hold its breath in terror. "And the only way you will have her is by taking her from my cold and rotting corpse."

Oh god... Not good. That was definitely a very wrong thing to say.

Sin'Chila, with his gaze blazing, simply nods. "Very well. As you wish."

And then it begins...

I blink – its a mere scant second of a moment – and then the entire mass of bodies around me spring into action. Chaos ensues as Yaknaur roars, vaulting forward from the side. Sin'Chila follows, joining his brother in his attack. I yelp as I'm all but tossed from one arm to another like a sack of grain, lugging me out of reach as they attempt to grab for me. Everything spins in a kaleidoscope of colour and shapes. They rush forward again and I'm wrenched away, a twin set of blades slashing out when they draw too close. I gasp when a strike catches Yaknaur across his massive chest, slicing it neatly until the flesh splits and his yellowish blood drips down his torso.

"No! Stop it!"

They don't hear me. None of them do. It's too late for that.

A hound leaps at us and Darvik's tail whips out and knocks it back like one would a tennis ball. It slams into a trunk, spine first, before slumping with a winded howl.

Weapon drawn at the front, tail covering his back, Darvik manages to calculate each attack and prevent it from coming. He boots back another beast like its nothing more than a football, only to then spin on his heel, ready for when Memnis tries to vault at him from the shadows. He catches my hunter mid-jump, grabbing him by his chest armour before slinging him away like he's merely a rag doll. All the while, he's holding me against his side like I'm his greatest treasure. He doesn't drop me, not even once. Even scarier still was the fact that he was managing to fight them all off with only one arm to defend himself with.

A set of star-shaped throwing knives come our way out of nowhere. With a hum, they circle and slice through the air, nearly skimming right by my face as Darvik rotates at the last possible moment. I gasp again, somewhat in relief, gripping onto his shoulder for dear life.

Wow! That had been close. Too close. Had Darvik not moved quickly enough I would have been hit by them; a thought that downright crippled me with horror.

"Careful, Brothers!" Sin'Chila roars from somewhere nearby. I can't see him due to my face being pressed into a firm, warm chest. "Watch your aim! Do not hit the female. He carries her too closely!"

Sin'Chila is suddenly there, twirling his spear with expertise, bringing its length down with all the might of a titan. Darvik drops, turning to cover me protectively. He takes the strike upon his back without so much as a flinch. At the impact, wood cracks and the staff splinters loudly into two. Taking Sin'Chila's moment of surprise, Darvik jumps up, carrying me with ease, whilst landing a sound roundhouse kick to his opponents head. It happens so fast I can barely keep track of it all. The force of it sends him flying back to the ground with an *oomph*.

Holy mother of...

There's no time to react as Yaknaur dives in to defend his brother. For an instant, Darvik lets me go to grapple with him and I feel myself start to fall. My stomach plummets as I claw to keep myself over his shoulder. The last thing I want is to drop down between the two of them when they're trying to render each other to pieces.

Like two bulls, the two males strain and push against one another. A stampede of muscle. Claws slash and heads slams together in a battle of strength against strength.

Sweat gleams across Darvik's back as I struggle to hold on, even using my legs to cling to him like a sloth. Their conjoined roars are savage, not in the slightest bit human.

No matter how much they try Darvik is keeping them at bay every time. How was he even managing to do it? I was beyond perplexed (and somewhat quietly impressed). Despite the fact that there was three of them, Darvik was easily winning the fight. Like a sturdy tree, he did not move or retreat. He stood fierce in the face of his adversaries, towering over them all, including Yaknaur; which was saying something.

I continue to shout for them to stop, my voice drowned out by their violence. Jaws snap and someone behind me bellows out in pain.

And then I see him…

Memnis.

He's slinking up behind Darvik, as stealthy as a panther. His slender black form makes not even the slightest noise as he approaches, almost within reach. To my surprise, he doesn't go for Darvik. Instead, he locks his gaze with mine. My stomach knots. My keeper's attention is on the foe in front of him, completely oblivious to the one coming from behind. His tail sways to one side and Memnis merely sidesteps it and creeps nearer.

He lifts his arms to me, his soundless command clear.

Come.

This was it. This was my chance to go to him and get out of the way of the fight. Heart pounding, I squirm higher over Darvik's shoulder, pressing my knee there as I bend over his back, reaching for Memnis' hands.

I strain, arm shaking as our fingertip scarcely brush together in brief contact. Almost there.

"No!"

Suddenly, Darvik stiffens and I sense his head turning as he realises what's happening. He lands a hard kick into Yaknaur's sternum, sending the huge male back and tumbling over a fallen tree. He yanks me away from Memnis, spinning to bark in his direction.

"Get back!"

Their hisses are guttural and deafening.

Something sings through the air, whizzing past Darvik's shoulder. It skims him there and in a clumsy error, he loses his grip and I fall to the ground, landing hard upon my knees. In haste, I start to crawl away.

Something latches itself around my ankle. His tail. Twisting, I gasp as he drags me back to him.

My mind is in panic. My breathing is laboured and frantic.

"Memnis!" I call out to him with my hand still outstretched out even as the distance between us grows again.

My cry echoes. The name sounding like the cracking of a whip, loud and shrill.

Everything seems to freeze then, even the wind seizes to blow.

Breathing hard, the hunter over me stills and slowly tilts his head to look down at me…

Darvik's POV

Memnisk.

This name. He knew this name. He'd heard it before, Darvik was sure of it.

The female below him squirms, trying to free herself from his grasp, fighting him. Could she not see he was trying to protect her? These hunters were the ones who had been following them, of that he was certain. They had hunted them and perhaps meant to harm her. So then, why was she behaving so foolishly?

"Enough! Female!" He grabs her by the nape and shakes her a little; she must see reason. "Bet still!"

"Memnis!"

Again, she shouts to the other hunter. It is almost as though she knows him, and he her. He, in turn, shifts closer, as if tempted to go to her. However, the small ones courage fades at the warning rumbles now rising from Darvik's throat. A challenge. A promise.

Scowling, Darvik hunkers over the *hoomans* tiny frame, sheltering her under his larger one. If they sought to take the female for their own then they would have to get through him; he would not accept defeat.

He lifts his head and glares at the smaller male again. Determined, yet wary. This one is quick and cunning, but he is also not showing any sign of attacking.

"*Lar-tee…"* The hunter speaks, the sound low, like a whine. His attention is fixed on the female, only briefly rising to Darvik's before dropping back to her. Torn. Uncertain.

Lor-tree? What was this foreign word? It was not the tongue of his people.

Come. Darvik urges in silent thought, leaning further over the hooman possessively. *Come and try to take her from me.*

This one was shorter than the other two; an easy opponent.

Whatever he sees in Darvik's expression forces him to retreat a step. Slowly, the male drops to his knees bringing himself to their level. His mandibles flare, though not in aggression. He trills in a low pleading tone, like a pup whining for a scrap of meat.

In response, Darvik feels the female shifting under him again. Looking down, he stares, watching as she tries to scurry away again. With careful prey-like movements, she heads towards the unknown hunter.

Frowning deepening, Darvik reaches for her leg again and pulls her back before she can get too far away.

Foolish creature. What was she--

"Darvik, no!" A strange noise emits from her throat; a whimpering cry like that of a wounded animal. "Please. Let me go…" she rasps, breathing harshly. "Let me go to him."

Go to him? Confusion growing, he simply stares at her, his anger churning. Did she have a death wish? Did she fear him that much that she was willing to throw herself to the mercy of those who only wished to kill her? His fury boils as his chest expands, pride wounded.

With a bark, he starts towards her again, only to pause. Hovering. Watching. Curiosity rears its head.

Taking the opportunity, the female practically throws herself forward, closing the space and falling into the waiting outstretched arms of the male that wasn't him.

Surprise slams into him as he watches the strange exchange that follows. The male does not attack the *hooman*, nor does he push her away when the female wraps her slender arms about his neck, burrowing into his mane.

The cries she had been emitting grow in volume, becoming frantically loud as she holds onto him as though he is her very life force.

“You came.” He hears the whisper. “You finally came.”

To his further astonishment, the younger male wraps her in his arms and nuzzles into her, purring soothingly like one would… *to a mate.*

Memnisk.

Ah, yes. It hits him then. He eyes them closely, observing the pair with part disgust and intrigue. Was her mate then? The one she had been waiting for all this time?

Darvik snorts, shaking his head. But this male was a Yautja? Was he not? One of his own, even though she was a *hooman.*

The second male – the biggest of three – strides forward and kneels beside them, huddling close to them both. The female reaches for him too, turning into him as she had the other one, rubbing and seeking his warmth.

“Yaknaur.” Her alien mouth presses to the side of the new males face as wetness seeps from her eyes. Surrendering, she submits to their touches, welcoming them.

So many emotions bombard him. First hate, followed by confusion and then a hollow emptiness that echoes painfully within his breast. All of the bloodlust he’d freed drains away in an instant; the female has deserted him and there is further need to fight. The defeat is his. This female has decided his fate… and she has chosen *them.*

Chakria, they called her. It was an ancient phrase, one hardly used by his people any more. In times of old, it would symbolise the loyalty between mates, the most unbreakable of bonds. A chosen female. For life.

Before, he had dismissed the scar-like mark upon the female's arm. And now, too late, he realised that it was the same as the one on the trios armour. The symbol of their clan.

The truth of it wounds him more than he’d like to admit as it dawns on him. She did not have just one mate, as he’d originally thought but *three* of them. They were all her males, and the third was--

A large shape settles at his side, towering there and casting a shadow over his knelt form. Bleakly, he lifts his head, already knowing who it is. The third member of their brotherhood stands there and their eyes clash in meeting before the sharpened edge of a spear is placed at Darvik’s throat.

With no fire left in his veins, Darvik simply stays there and stares up at their leader, waiting for the killing strike that would inevitably come.

“I gave you fair warning, warrior,” the large male sneers down at him, digging the tip deeper into his throat, drawing blood. “And instead you chose death. So now… *you must die.*”

Darvik blinks slowly and nods, jutting his chin, ready to face his end with courage. The spear rises, readying to impale his flesh. The arm holding it brings it down and--

“Stop!” A female voice cries, shattering the stillness. “No! Sin’Chila, don’t!”

Chapter 32

“Please, don’t hurt him!” I shout, diving forward to grab for Sin’Chila’s bulging bicep. I tug on him, drawing his focus away from Darvik and down to me. His face is like thunder, furious at being interrupted.

“You…” he inhales deeply, seeking the last remaining shred of his patience. “You wish for us to spare him? After all that he has done?” He points his spear towards the kneeling hunter in disdain.

I shake my head, insistent. “He has never harmed me, Sin’Chila. In fact, I owe him a lot, more than you realise..”

It wasn’t exactly a lie, per se. It was true that – albeit begrudgingly -Darvik had kept me safe since returning to this planet. Without him, I would have probably died or been eaten by some wild creature. I mean, sure, the guy could be a bit of a grump sometimes, but he could also be decent. He’d fed me and kept me safe; even if most of the time it had been for his own benefit. At any time, he could have killed me or left me to die. Any other hunter would have probably taken my skin and used it to make a coat with.

Something about him drew me to him. On some level, over the last few days, I’d managed to connect with him, perhaps even bonded to him – though I would never admit that to anyone else.

“If it weren’t for him I would still be on that ship, being dragged back to Earth and unable to see you again,” I reason.

Sin’Chila chuckles dryly. “*Never.* We would have found you…” He lifts a hand, being careful to bend his claws away as he strokes the curve of my cheek. “Do you doubt the abilities of your mates, Chakria?”

I grab for his large fingers and squeeze. “Of course not. Look, I know you’re angry because he took me, but can’t you see? In a way, he’s done us all a favour by doing it. Now I’m here and we’ve found each other again.”

Memnis and Yakanur stand to one side, observing our exchange with interest.

Sin’Chila grunts and pulls away, unmoved. “Not good enough.” His beady yellow eyes narrow at me with suspicion. “You cannot use your sweet words to weaken me this time. I demand vengeance for what has happened. This victory is *mine.*”

When he begins to face Darvik again, I reach for the leather of his belt and yank on it. I mean, how else was I supposed to get a seven-foot plus scary alien to keep his focus on me? I couldn’t let him hurt Darvik; even though a serious sense of Deja Vu was nudging at my mind. Once again I was being put into the position of begging for someone else's life. Just like I had with Li. It almost made me want to roll my eyes at the irony.

“He is not the one who took me!” I shout again, needing to be heard. “The other humans did that! You cannot blame Darvik!”

Sin’Chila whirls back to me again with a snap of his jaws. “*Darveek*?… You dare to speak this males name?” He crowds closer and I stiffen in response. My pulse thrums into my ears.

Refusing to be intimidated, I glare up at him. “They took everything from him. His ship. His freedom. They beat him like an animal and put him in chains until--”

“I do not care what the *hoomans* do and do not do!” The loudness of his sudden roar makes me flinch. “He is a heathen. *Bad blood*. He tried to take our female and keep her for himself. I want his head!”

I sigh, losing the will to argue with him. “Come on, Sin’Chila, that’s not true and you know it. He had no intention of keeping me, he was just using me to get to you.”

Although I wasn’t entirely sure, part of me believed that Darvik hadn’t known about my *mates* or of the fact they were not human either. He’d probably been expecting an angry mob of earthlings with pitchforks and torches to come to my rescue, not a clan of skilled hunters.

He hadn’t wanted me for himself. No way. He didn’t seem the sort at all. He was far too distant and solitary a figure to want something so sentimental. And yet, a memory surges…

“*Female, you are in need,” he’d purred huskily, crouching over my lying body. His chest had brushed mine as he’d leaned down, pressing closer, inhaling deeply. His mismatched eyes ablaze. “I will serve you.”*

I shiver and shake my head to clear it. Noticing my reaction, Sin’Chila frowns. Of their own accord, my sight trails sideways to Darvik who is as still as a statue.

Yaknaur moves into our line of vision. Puffing his chest, he growls down at the other male. “Keep your eyes to the floor, whelp.”

Even Memnis, who is usually the voice of reason, does not interfere. He simply hovers to one side, as observant and as quiet as a spectre.

“Sin’Chila, please,” I start again, beginning to sound like a broken record even to my own ears. I return to him, peering up with a frantic expression. I reach for his arm again, hoping to convey my earnestness. I lower my tone, making it almost a whisper. “He’s not a threat to any of us. He’ll leave…” I peer around Yaknaur’s huge self to nod encouragingly to Darvik. “Won’t you, Darvik?” I shrug. “See. There’s no harm done and no need for any further violence.”

They all turn to Darvik, seeking his response. By their glares alone, it’s clear they’re seeking any reason to tear him a new one. I squirm, uneasy, flashing him a meaningful look as though I’ve suddenly become skilled in the art of telepathy.

Come on, you big, dumb idiot. Say yes. Agree and get the hell out of here.

Darvik's white-yellow eyes bore into me, as sharp and cool as ice, yet burning with some inner fire I could not name. He peers around at us all, measuring us all one by one. His disdain is obvious for each of my men, but when he looks at me I see something entirely different lurking in the depths of his scarred face.

For a long beat, he says nothing. And then his chin lifts, his shoulders broadening with a hint of determination.

Slowly, he shakes his head.

No.

It's there, loud and clear even though he doesn't actually say it. He doesn't surrender. He doesn't agree to our terms. He's refusing to back down, even now when his life is hanging by a single thread.

Why? I think it frantically, over and over. Confused. Why won't he just go? It would be such a simple and easy thing to do, for all of us. I didn't want him to get hurt. Couldn't he see how hard I was trying to help him? To save his life?

"Damn these Yautja males and their insufferable pride," I mutter, more to myself, yet I see Sin'Chila – who is closest to me – cock his head.

He rotates to me and his heavy hand dives its way into my long hair. He pulls me to him and I gasp at the heat of his chest pressing against my front. Like a mountain, he bows over me, making my knees weak in an instant. Firmly, yet also carefully, he tugs on my locks, forcing my head back and my neck to arch in a position of submissiveness.

Surprised, I emit a whimper as his breath finds my face and for some reason, I hear Darvik rumble a warning growl from nearby.

"You speak of pride, my Chakria," Sin'Chila says lowly. "Yet you cannot begin to know the toil and pain we have endured since you have been gone from our side." Despite his harsh and angry words, I begin to soften. Without pausing, he continues. "Everything has its limits, including me. We nearly lost you once before, and I will never…" He presses closer still for emphasis, practically moulding his huge body to my smaller one. "*Never*… allow it to happen again. This I vow. And if that means ridding ourselves of every breathing creature within these lands to do so, then it shall be done." He calls then to his brother. "Yaknaur! Finish it."

I barely have time to react. The sound of steel sliding free snaps through the air. Yaknaur lunges forward, his naked blade glinting as he drives it right towards Darvik's unprotected chest.

"No!" I all but screech, adrenaline surging through me like a storm.

Tears flood my vision as I suck in a sigh of relief when Yaknaur hesitates, pausing in his attack. My lip trembles as he swivels to me.

“Why do you defend him so fiercely?” Yaknaur grunts. Agitated, his muscled body flexes, causing the dark netting around his thighs and biceps to tighten. “He is a dog, not even worthy of the air that he breathes.”

He seems confused by my behaviour. But that’s ok. Even I’m confused with myself right now. Shaking, I inch towards them.

“You can’t do this,” I whimper, trying not to break down into full-blown tears. Gathering my courage, I throw out my last card, my last chance of stopping this terrible thing from happening. “I am your female, am I not? You cannot deny me.”

I use their own words – words they’d used against me many times before – to get my point across. “I forbid you from taking his life. As your Chakria, as your mate a-and…” I stammer for a moment, seeking my bravery when I felt like I had none. I lift a hand to my stomach. “And… as the mother to your young, I…”

Good god, why was I stammering like an idiot? *Get a grip, Charlotte.* Just say it.

I can’t find it in me to finish, yet in an instant Sin’Chila is suddenly standing over me, reaching for my face with his massive mottled paw.

“What did you say?” His sunken eyes, though inhuman, are wide and wild.

Anxious, I nod. I take hold of his hand and place it against my stomach, holding it there meaningfully. The heat of his palm sears me even through my clothing.

“A baby, Sin’Chila…” I try to explain, somewhat uselessly. What was it they called it? Ah, yes. “A suckling.”

The longest pause known to man follows, heavy like a smog. I peer at each of them in turn as disbelief morphs into abrupt understanding. They look to each other, sharing their shock, before returning to me.

And then… just like that… the spell is broken.

Without warning, all three of them swamp around me, closing in so close to point of almost being suffocating. Taken aback, I step back, only to bump into a solid chest. Their huge bodies cage me in as roughened claws stroke and pet at me, making my skin tingle with heat. My hips. My nape. My arms. My thighs. Their purrs and trills are like a melody to my ears. Soothing. Alluring.

“Show me.” Sin’Chila rumbles the command.

One of them – I’m not sure who – lifts the fabric of my top, nearly flashing my tits in the process, pinning me back against them. Sin’Chila drops to kneel in front of me. His tusk clack as he rubs his angular face into my midriff, inhaling deeply. A deep purr follows.

As though in response to his touch, something inside me stirs and warms. Strange and yet wonderful all at once.

“She carries new life.” One of them says headily. “Our young?”

Sin’Chila nod against me. “Yes. *Ours.*”

They all coo and purr in union, clearly pleased and proud.

I place a hand onto Sin’Chila’s shoulder, which brings his awe-filled expression up to me.

“Please…I’m so tired of this,” I beg for seems like the millionth time today. “No more fighting now. You’ve won. Isn’t that enough?” I stroke his roughened cheek lovingly. “Take me home.”

Without hesitation, Sin’Chila opens his arms to me and I go into them willingly. He lifts me, carrying me against him like a stolen treasure. As one, they all turn and face the silent Yautja behind them. Even when their backs had been facing him, he hadn’t attacked, neither had he took the chance the flee. He’s been watching us the entire time. His eyes sharp. Missing nothing.

When that cunningly bright stare lands onto me, Sin’Chila shifts me higher against him, one hand sliding up my top to cup the underside of my breast in a possessive display.

He growls. “You will leave this place and never return. For my female's sake, I offer you this small shred of mercy.”

Darvik says nothing, he just continues to stare… at me.

Sin’Chila continues. “And should we ever have the misfortune to meet again, I vow that I will kill you. Do not doubt it.”

Conversation done, Sin’chila strides away, carrying me with him. Yaknaur and Memnis follow, trailing either side of us like two loyal guardians.

We’re going. We’re finally leaving and returning to the ship. Everything was going to be Ok.

I peer back over Sin’Chila’s shoulder one last time, drawn in that direction like a moth to a flickering flame. Darvik is still watching us walk away and when our eyes make contact I feel a tiny pang of sadness.

I am one of the Vindas… A wanderer… One whom is unwelcome.

‘*Go’*. I mouth it and offer him a small, reluctant wave. Whatever fate had in mind for him, I only hoped it was something meaningful and filled with even just a little bit of joy. I barely knew him, but I also didn’t hate him either. Quite the contrary.

His face is a mask but his mismatched eyes are luminous, glowing with some unfathomable intent. The darkening promise within their depths is as sharp as steel, even as he begins fades away from view. I cling to my hunter and shiver as an eerie sense of foreboding whispers against my skin, causing goosebumps to rise there.

And then, he's gone. Without further ado, my hunters journey further into the vast foliage, taking me with them.

Finally, taking me home again. Where I belonged.

Darvik's POV

He watches them go, fixated on the small pale face staring now fading away from him. Within moments they're gone, disappearing into the wilderness.

She is gone. The *hooman.* His prize. His…

Nothing. She is nothing! Darvik chides himself quietly.

He had no further need for her. Now was the time for retreating and licking his wounds, not concerning himself with things of no importance. Part of him knew that he should be grateful to be escaping with his limbs intact, but his pride was too strong.

Let them go. Forget about them, the inner voice of wisdom continues to urge. They were nothing, nor would they ever meet again. They had no purpose or place in his world.

The clouds overhead rumble as rain suddenly unleashes its attack. His locks soon become drenched, sticking and dripping down his shoulders, although he does not feel its chill.

With a snort, Darvik rises to his feet, his powerful legs shaking a little as his lust for blood simmers into a dull heat in his belly. The battle had taken more out of him than he would like to admit. His adversaries had been strong, even against three he had struggled to keep the upper hand of the fight.

This was a defeat he would and must learn from, he decided. Thinking about it now, he should have killed the female when he'd had the chance and ridden himself of this failure.

She was weak. Worthless. And--

You cannot blame him! She'd cried, seeking to have his death prevented. *They've taken everything from him… beat him like an animal and put him in chains.*

All energy drains from him then, his shoulders slumping. Becoming lost in thought, he tilts his head and lifts his gaze back to the line of trees where the four had fled.

Why? The question hits him. Why had the female defended him against her males? In truth, they'd had every right to take his hide for daring to use her. Surely she loathed him just as all the others did. So then… Why? He could not seem to fathom it.

Her eyes had been so wild and afraid, her fear tangible even upon his tongue. Yet she had persisted. She had declared him worthy and in turn, her mates had spared his life, allowing him to live one more day. A great and rare gift indeed.

Lifting a paw, he wipes at his chin, smearing the blood there, uncaring of his injuries or where they had come from. Breathing heavily, he eyes the ground, tracing the clawed prints sunken within the mud there. Their scents still lingered in the air, leaving a trail. One that could easily be followed…

Do not do this, his mind speaks again, its anger aimed at his own foolish ideas. *What need have you to seek them out again? None. Keep your distance and forget about them. Forget about the female.*

It should be an easy task, not even the slightest bit of a hardship.

"*You find me unworthy?" He'd asked her.*

The memory surges.

"*It's not that… Please, understand." She had spoken to him, not with mockery but softly. A foreign thing.*

"*Have you no family, Darvik? No kin?" Her curiosity of him had been clear, if trepid.*

"*Nej. No. I am a wanderer. One of the unwelcome."*

"*I'm sorry."*

Her pity had wounded his ego. Never before had anyone spoken to him thus, yet something about her tone had quietened him and stilled his growing rage. She had moved him.

Even now, his breast still felt the warmth of her body from where she had clung to him. The scent of her flesh covered him like a brand.

She is not yours.

Provoked, he shifts, standing taller. His tail sways, curling around his thigh, its motion growing excited. Agitated.

"Not yet," he purrs the words aloud. The jungle around him stills as if holding its breath to await his next plan of action.

He inhales and draws in the air, seeking out each nuance and hint of life. He focuses upon one in particular. Not like his own but subtle and slightly sweet. His chosen unwilling prey; the one he was finding more intriguing with each passing of the moon.

Claws fisting, he shoves reason aside and allows something else to takes its place. Something cunning and dark. A plan forming.

His skin prickles and the spines across his domed skull shiver with anticipation.

"*Should we ever have the misfortune to meet again, I vow that I will kill you.*"

Such idle threats were empty, and their codes and morals meaningless. He was one of the Vindas; one who could not be controlled or restrained. After everything he had endured since his birth, death was not something he feared easily. He would face all of his foes head-on for the chance to prove his worth, to find his place in the world.

And to have the female *hooman* look at him again with such softness in her eyes.

Chapter 33

“Give her to me, brother. Let me hold her for a while,” Yaknaur says, somewhat sulkily, as he strides at our side.

“No. Now is not the time. We have much to do.” Comes the snapped reply and the arms around me band tighter.

Snuggled tight against Sin’Chila’s chest, we journey through the vast woodlands, weaving through as though they knew each rock and bush like the back of their hand. His powerful walk is quick and eager, slowing only the slightest when the familiar sight of their large worn ship slips into view. Its shape reminds me of that of a giant metal bird, with four sets of wings and various turrets and engines connected to its sides. For a second, it shivers in the light, the force shield around it dropping as Yaknaur swipes at something across his wrist guard.

Without a word, they take me up the ramp, their footsteps heavy and thudding. Quietly, I cling to Sin’Chila’s neck, feeling safe yet uncertain. They head down a narrow corridor but pass the area of the main deck.

“Where are we going?” I finally ask, peering at the side of Sin’Chila’s inhuman profile. The slopes of his face are raw and tight with deepening thought.

He doesn’t answer. His expression is like a darkened cave, revealing nothing to me. The doors before us swish open at our approach and I recognise the room as the medical bay. With utmost care, my hunter places me down onto the examination bench, leaning away to trail his luminous gaze over my person. His eyes are sunken but bright, missing nothing.

“We must ensure you are not hurt,” he says.

Seemingly out of nowhere, he pulls out a ‘T’ shaped device. With a click, it extends, emitting a low hum as he starts to draw it close to my torso, scanning over it carefully.

“Do you feel any pain? Do you have any wounds? Do you--”

“I’m fine, Sin’Chila.” I reach out to lightly pat his massive bicep. “Relax. I’m fine.”

Yaknaur, in all his brutish and fierce glory, stands at my side like a mountain and observes, equally as intense and troubled.

“If any harm has come to you…” Sin’Chila utters darkly, more to himself than to me. He continues to sweep the device over my limbs. “I will not hesitate again. I will return and find *him* and finish--”

I pat him again, resting my hand there to draw his focus to me. “But I told you, I’m fine. You have nothing to worry about.”

He grunts, as if uncertain, but then nods, accepting my answer. Dropping the scanner, he spins away to frantically search for something else. Yaknaur joins him by one of the stations and they begin a low toned conversation between themselves. I can't hear what they're saying but they both become animated, not quite arguing but not completely agreeing with each other either.

I stare at their backs, a little perplexed.

Squirming on the bench, I turn my head to look for Memnis. I find him hovering by the door, half concealed by shadows. His sleek black figure nearly blends in with the darkened walls behind him. He's being eerily quiet for some reason. In fact, he's hardly uttered a word since the fight with Darvik.

His massive head rotates and his attention slides from his brothers to me. I flash him a warm smile, holding my hand out to him, hoping to draw him to my side. I've missed him and the others a great deal and wanted one of them close to me; even if just to feel their skin and familiar warmth again.

To my surprise, he drops his gaze to the floor and then shifts his face away. He doesn't come towards me and his whole demeanour practically screams of dismissal, like he's trying to pretend I'm not there.

What?...But why? What have I done?

My arm drops slowly as my confusion morphs into anxiety.

What was wrong with him? Why was he acting so strangely? A thought surges then. Did he blame me? Perhaps he was angry at me for what had happened?

"Erm… guys," I speak, trying to get their attention.

Still facing away from me, they continue their discussion in heated tones. One of them points to a screen and the shrugs.

"Hello," I call again, "can we... just have a moment, please? I think we should--"

Suddenly Sin'Chila is standing over me. Even from my high seat on the table, he's much taller than me. My neck cranes back to look up at him.

"Be still," he rumbles and starts to lift the hem of my top. The undersides of my breasts are flashed in the process without warning.

I jerk, taken aback and try to scoot away. "Hey! Hang on."

Something cool is pressed and slid against my belly. It starts at my bellybutton, guided by Sin'Chila's hand, before rolling its way further down towards the V between my hipbones.

"What are you doing?" I ask him, only to fall silent as a flicker of blue-ish light emerges beside us. The floating image shimmers for a beat and settles to reveal a 3D scale of the

inside of my body. Yaknaur sweeps across it with a finger, tapping at the air and zooming in until a particular part is shown for all to see.

My womb. The *baby.* It appears like that of an ultrascan back on earth, only with more detail and clearer. Like before, I could see its body-like structure. Not quite fully formed yet but definitely there and real. It seems different somehow this time. Larger. With two little arms and legs now sprouting from its potato-like shape.

“There,” Sin’Chila breathes, nodding towards the projection with obvious pride.

“So, it is true,” Yaknaur moves closer, mimicking his brothers' awe.

I snort. “Well, yeah. I did tell you.” It’s almost as if they hadn’t believed me.

“Are you certain?” Yaknaur asks as they look to one another. “She is a *hooman* .”

“I am certain.” Is the reply.

“And it is healthy?”

Sin’chila nods. “Yes… a son.”

Shock hits me as I hadn’t been expecting that news so soon. It was a boy?

“You can tell what the gender is?” I ask, astonished. I lift my top higher to look down at myself. I chew on my lip as I notice the slight mound now forming there. The smooth slope of my midriff was now a gentle hill; the baby was growing faster than I’d anticipated and I hadn’t even noticed. How long did a Yautja gestation period last for? I had no idea of what to expect or even how long it would be before it arrived. I had so many questions to ask them.

I peer back at the hologram and stare at the fetuses domed head. Everything else seemed relatively normal. Human even.

“A little hunter,” Sin’Chila adds.

His claws lightly scrape my skin on passing and I shiver at the contact, which causes him to pause and lift a mottled brow at me. He drops the tool in his grasp and instead places his hot palm flat against my stomach possessively. He leans in and my cheeks warm. This male of mine is a huge monstrosity of a creature, yet the way he touches and looks at me makes me go all gooey inside like a freshly baked brownie.

“A ka *va* . Yes, my son will be a great warrior,” Yaknaur pipes up, preening proudly. He thumps his chest. “You see! I have done well. My seed is fertile and strong.

“What?” The other male rotates to him with a dark scowl. “Whose *kava* ?” The warning in Sin’Chila’s voice is both playful and stern. “What lies do you speak of now, you hound? I should whip you for saying that.”

Yaknaur inclines to me with a jaw splitting grin. “He is envious of my virility, my female. Do not doubt it.”

Sin'Chila grunts, the sound part laughter. He shoves at his brother, forcing him back so that he can pass to head for one of the nearby tables. He doesn't retort but I can see the hardened set of his shoulders.

I smile at them both, amused by their banter. I let my gaze slip to Memnis again and my joy fades. He's simply standing there, unmoving and without a trace of happiness like the others are showing.

Something within me plunges.

"Memnis?" I call softly to him.

He doesn't turn to face me, but answers sombrely. "Yes, my Chakria?"

"Are you…" I stammer, uncertain of what to say. His behaviour is so cool and distant and I find myself uncertain of what to say.

I glance up and find that Yaknaur's sunken gaze is flitting between me and the darkened figure of his brother. There's a knowing gleam there, telling me that something is amiss, that he knows something that I don't. Dr Sin'Chila, however, is oblivious to it all, sweeping from one screen to another, mumbling away to himself.

I sigh and my mood drops further. As if sensing it, Yaknaur moves forward and slides himself between my thighs. He presses into me, drawing me to the edge of the table in a bid to bring our chests together. With a purr, he burrows into my hair, sifting and combing at my locks with his crab-like mandibles.

"Where have you been, my mate?" He rumbles, rubbing his massive torso into me like a cat. His abs are like stone under my palms, ridged with enough muscle that you could probably grate cheese on them. "We almost lost you."

I smile softly and reach up to stroke his roughened cheek. "I'm all right, don't worry. I'm just glad to be back."

For such a big, grizzly male he really could be a softie at times. I used to fear his roughness, but now I found his personality endearing and exciting. I'd changed so much since coming here, for the better, and so had they.

His paw wraps around my throat but not in threat. The heat of his breath fans my cheek. "The *hoomans* were unwise to steal you from us. I should have rendered them limb from limb and hung their entrails across these walls a trophy."

Erm… Ok then. On second thought, maybe he's hadn't changed that much.

I offer a small cringe-laugh. "Yeah, that really won't be necessary."

"You doubt me?" He teases back in a low growl. "Do you not know who I am?" He whacks his chest again, puffing it out like an ape trying to show his dominance. "I am Yaknaur. The greatest of hunters. The most skilled of warriors and--"

“Enough.” Sin’Chila interrupts, shoving his taller brother aside with a huff of amusement. “Stop your posturing. What are you? A bull?” He takes Yaknaur’s place between my parted knees. He flashes me a firm look. “You must rest. You must be weary. But first…”

I was about to nod in agreement when he jerks forward, sniffing at me suddenly like one would at something unpleasant. His beastly features scrunch as if offended.

“You must bathe...You stink.”

I choke on a laugh, taken aback. “Excuse me?” Did he really just say that? What the hell. “What do you expect? I’ve been sleeping in caves and bushes for the last few days. It’s not exactly a five-star hotel.”

They both tilt their heads, clearly not understanding what a ‘hotel’ is.

“Ugh. Nevermind.”

“You smell of that male,” Sin’Chila hisses. “You reek of him.”

I shrug and squirm a little. Their eyes are quickly brightening like flames, burning into me like a brand and something low in my belly quivers in response to it.

What could I say? It’s not like I had a choice in any of it. Darvik had taken me from the ship. Sure, I guess I was the one who had set him free to begin with, but I’d never thought for a moment that he’d kidnap me and take me with him.

My two males crowd impossibly closer and the air seems too thin. My heartbeat quickens at the searing intensity of their stares.

Sin’Chila slips his claws into my hair, tugging my head back to look down into my face. “Something must be done. I do not like that you carry his scent. You must be cleansed. I will not a have a dirty female in my hold, no matter how small and tempting she may be.”

“Tempting? Well, Ok then.” I wriggle my eyebrows suggestively before arching a bit, pretending to feel pain in my side. “You know, now that you mention it, I might have pulled something earlier on. Maybe I’ll need some help with washing my back.” I try and bite back a smirk.

Sin’Chila hovers closers, inches away from my face with a heady rumble in his throat. “ *Female* .” It sounds almost like a warning. “Tread carefully with your teasing. My limits have become fragile during your absence.” His hips grind forward and I feel the tell-tale sign of his arousal against my groin.

The idea of resting suddenly no longer appealed to me. I wasn’t overly hungry either. I had other more exciting things on my mind and it had everything to do with getting my clothes off and getting naked with my hunters.

Daring, I whisper to him. “And what if I don’t want to?”

Without warning, the world moves as Sin'Chila scoops me up. He heads for the door, taking me with him. Yaknaur and Memnis follow behind as we head out into the corridor and down another passageway. Seconds later we're in the bathing suite, striding towards the massive pool at the centre of the room. With ease, Sin'Chila steps into the heated waters, moving down the steps before slowly lowering me into its welcoming warmth. I hiss a little as it wraps around my aching legs. I giggle when eager hands begin to pull at my clothes.

"Steady on!" I chuckle when Yaknaur yanks a bit too harshly to get my top over my head. At one point it snags around my ears and I have to help him pull it off. Before I know it, I'm completely naked and not at all embarrassed by the fact.

They both purr as one of them steps up and braces me from behind; a solid wall of maleness. The other closes in from the front, sandwiching me between them. I barely come to their chests and it makes me feel small and vulnerable, and even more aroused.

Taking it in turns, they scoop up handfuls of water and pour it over my skin. My arms. My hair. My back and hips. Their fingers are careful, being sure to keep their claws from scratching me.

Yaknaur moulds himself further against my spine, rubbing his jaw across my shoulder like a cat, as though trying to wipe his scent there.

My breath quickens and the space between my thighs starts to come alive, throbbing with a need only they could ever inspire and ease.

God, It was so good to be back again. I'd missed this. Missed their touches.

I inhale sharply when Sin'Chila kneads my breast, strumming a thickened thumb across its sensitive peak.

"These will soon swell with milk," he trills, his tone heady with pride and need. "Tell me now, Chakria. I want to know…" He pinches my tip harder this time, forcing a moan from my throat. My back arches and my backside rubs back into Yaknaur's swelling groin. His cock is growing there like a god damned tree trunk. "Where did that heathen touch you?" Sin'Chila growls, demanding a response. "Did he try to claim you?"

"No," I respond a bit too quickly.

It wasn't a lie. Not exactly anyway. I couldn't bring myself to tell them of what had happened that night when Darvik had tried to offer himself to me. I feared their response but also didn't want to make them worry. Nothing had happened and so I chose my next words carefully.

"I wouldn't have allowed it. I belong only to you," I gasp when he flicks at my nipple again, tormenting it before moving onto the other one. "Please…" I don't know what I'm begging for but the emptiness between my legs is getting persistent, urgent to the point of stealing away all of my logic. "No more talking. I need you close to me. Take me!"

Sin'Chila's snarl is almost dangerous, edged with something that makes my toes curl with want.

Yaknaur's cock digs into my back now, the tip wet with excitement and smearing a mark into my skin. On impulse, I lick at my lips, suddenly thirsty.

Sin'Chila moves and I yelp as he snatches me up. He all but hefts my weight into his arms. My own arms go about his neck in surprise as my legs are guided to wrap around his slender hips. Fabric moves and I gasp again when he shifts me over his jutting naked cock, sneaking the tip through my folds to sit against my slippery entrance.

Clinging to him, I meet his starved expression with our faces inches away from one another's. His eyes smoulder and cut me like a fiery knife. No mercy. Feral and needy.

"The thought of another male being close to you is enough to make my blood boil." He sneers into my hair whilst slipping further into my tightening pussy. "I will not allow it."

"I swear! There has been no one else. Only you!" I whimper into his throat, struggling to take his size even though he's feeding it to me inch by agonising inch.

One muscled arm binds about my waist, the other slides up my back, grasping my locks again to draw my head back in a position of submissiveness. There is something about baring one's throat that makes me feel deliciously helpless.

"Hurry, brother," Yaknaur growls from somewhere behind us. The sound of slickened flesh tells me that he's stroking his cock, eager to be inside of me as well. "I do not think I can wait much longer."

With another grunt, Sin'Chila slams me down over him in one smooth motion. We both hiss at how amazing it feels to be joined together again. My sex stretches to the point of burning. He fills me so completely, so much so that I can scarcely draw breath.

"Our nest has been so empty without you, Chakria. So very cold." He begins to move, lifting me almost fully from him before grinding me back down again, straight to his balls. My clitoris rubs into his groin, sending shards of pleasure slicing through me like a knife of fire. "I have been unable to spill my seed." He thrusts deep again, slowly gaining in pace. "I have been saving it all for you. Do you feel it, my female? Do feel my swollen *cros* filling your creaming little *snat* ?"

"Yes!"

Over and over, he slides into me, steadily turning us both into nothing but a pair of rutting animals. My cries meld and echo into one another, pleading for more. I needed. I ached. I wanted them to devour me and make me shatter apart for them.

"Submit to me." He urges lowly and with strange tenderness. "Give me all. Give me everything."

The world starts to fade and my body clenches down on him. With a silent scream, my mouth falls open as my climax rushes at me like an angry tornado. The walls of my pussy spasm and ripple, milking him hard. His grip tightens and his next thrust cuts short as he starts to flood the inside of my cunt with his hot cum.

“Chakria,” Sin’Chila groans, holding me still as if trying to force his seed in as deep as possible. “You are *mine* .”

I hum, languid and momentarily limp, accepting all that he has to give me.

“Let me have her!”

I have no time to even blink. Without warning, Sin’Chila pulls himself from my sex and his semen dribbles free. For a second, I think he’s about to lower me down, but he doesn’t. Instead, he lifts me a little higher and grabs for each of my ass cheeks, palming them roughly before spreading them open for all to see. Another body presses up close from behind and a hard cock shoves forward, filling me in one swift movement.

“Oh my god!” I arch, surprised by the sudden fullness again.

“Give her what she craves, Yaknaur. Take her now.” Sin’Chila commands from beside my ear.

Yaknaur snarls, grabbing for my hips. He draws out and his massive shaft glides against my still fluttering flesh. He pulls out and then dives back in roughly. Savage with hunger.

With a whine, I peer back over my shoulder, trying to see his face even as I still cling to Sin’Chila like a sloth.

Yaknaur’s eyes meet mine and shadows play across his gnarled alien features. He appears more beastly than ever. My gentle protector is gone and all that remains now is an animal that wants to dominate. That wants to fuck.

“Hold her steady.”

His brother gathers me further into him, holding me captive against their conjoined attack.

“Oh, please.” My whines are verging on sobs. A fresh climax, more intense than the first, starts to claw at me, coming out of nowhere. Like a tsunami, it threatens to drown me within its depths.

Yaknaur grips my nape, pinning me forward against male flesh.

“She is so tight.”

At his words, my pussy clenches, suckling on his throbbing shaft. It’s so thick and girthy, ridged with textured flesh that makes my toes curl and my eyes roll with sensations.

Without relent, Yaknaur fucks me quick and hard. The heavy sacks of his balls slam against my folds. He’s going so deep it’s almost as if he’s trying to lodge himself there, right into the neck of my womb.

“My female,” he chants over and over. “My little female… Take me… Such a good little female.”

I can’t fight against them; I don’t even want to. There’s something powerful happening between us now. Even though I’m the one who is held captive, I feel like a goddess. Wanted. Loved.

The precipice arrives and I tumble down it with a scream of delight. My pussy succumbs to violent convulsions again, I can’t seem to stop them, so I claw at Sin’Chila’s back like a wild thing.

“Yes. YES!”

With a roar, Yaknaur follows me into bliss. He shudders behind me, sinking in hard one last time before holding himself there. His cock jerks, shooting his cum to join that of his brothers.

“Oh, wow,” I mumble, wiping at my dry lips. I hang there for a beat, dazed and thoroughly sated.

I’m done. I can barely even think straight.

Breathless, Yaknaur pulls free and I groan at the loss of him.

“There is still one more who needs you, Chakria,” Sin’Chila purrs, nuzzling close.

Slowly, he lowers me to my feet, steadying me when I wobble on my shaking legs.

Even though I’m tired, I know we’re not done yet. Someone is missing from our group. One of us is missing. I had been so lost in my lust that I hadn’t noticed his absence from my side, until now. He hadn't even come to join us.

I turn to look for him...

“Where is Memnis?”

Chapter 34

“Memnis?”

Something in me plummets and my chest tightens as I realise he’s not amongst our trio.

Where is he?

“I am here, Chakria.”

In a blind panic, I whirl to face him. Some of my anxiety fades but not entirely. As there he stands, not far away, hovering still by the door. His slender figure is somewhat bowed as though wounded. His head is slightly turned away as if trying to avoid meeting my gaze, reminding me of a chastised dog who’s been caught chewing its owner's slippers. A frown dips across my brow.

Still fully naked, I take a step towards him. To my surprise, I see him flinch. Yes, ‘ *flinch* ’. The reaction looks absurd coming from a huge beastly hunter of his size.

Perplexed for a beat, I pause in my approach. Memnis’ head bows further, his inky locks swinging across his wide shoulders like charred rope.

“Memnis?” I say it softly. Uncertain. When he does not answer or lift his head, I speak again. “Are you… Ok?” I peer back towards Sin’Chila and Yaknaur sharing my worry with them.

Their expressions are masks; still and stone-like. They know something is wrong but seem reluctant to share it with me. I lift my hands in a ‘what’s going on’ gesture yet neither of them speaks.

I return my focus to Memnis and edge closer to him tentatively. A low whine rolls through his throat and his jaws flare as if restless. His knees bend a little as he attempts to lower his height, to appear as non-threatening as possible.

What the hell? I’m completely dumbfounded. What the hell is going on?

Even though he’s trying his hardest not to face me, there’s no ignoring the bulging evidence of his arousal inside the leather of his loincloth. Sensing the direction of my stare, he emits a low keening sound again and drops his mottled hand down, trying to hide it from my view in shame.

I don’t know why but it bothers me that he’s being like this. Everything about what he’s doing is telling me that he doesn’t want me close. Why won’t he look at me? It hurts. After all I’d gone through, trying to find my way back to them. Was he not happy to see me?

Maybe he was angry at me because of what had happened?

In my mind, I go in circles trying to fathom it. All I want is to go to him. I’ve missed him so much. My body is still slightly sore from my other two mates passionate loving and their

seed is still trickling between my thighs, even now. But I still want Memnis too.

I stand there for a moment, lost and momentarily timid. I fear his rejection and could almost anticipate it through the tension in the air.

A large roughened palm pushes against my back. A gentle nudge.

“Go to him, Chakria.” Sin’Chila urges lowly from beside my ear. “His pain has been great since you have been away.”

I crane my neck to frown at him. Sin’Chilla’s eyes are bright with some inner intelligence. Knowing.

“Heal him,” he rumbles, nudging at me again. “He needs you.”

Heal him? I return to Memnis, confused. Was he hurt? I didn’t fully understand what Sin’Chila was trying to tell me.

“Memnis. What is wrong?” I address him directly, my voice wavering a notch. I hold my arms out, encouraging him to come to me. “Come here, you silly bean. I won't bite.” I try to tease him, to lighten the mood, yet it seems awkward.

He doesn’t move, doesn’t so much as flinch. His head remains downcast.

“He blames himself,” Yaknaur says, breaking the long stillness that follows.

Again, I’m still none the wiser. “I don’t understand.”

I sense, rather than see, Yaknaur approach from my left. His presence is like a tree, solid and powerful at my side.

Sin’Chila rumbles a reply, huffing with impatience but it doesn’t seem to be aimed at me. “He blames himself for having lost you. He considers it a great failure, as both a male and a warrior.”

The realisation hits me then and the reality of it floors me for a second; he thinks that he is responsible for the fact that the humans had taken me.

“But it's not true,” I say to them all.

It had all been beyond any of our control. What did it even matter? I was home again now and that was all that mattered. I didn’t want this distance between us.

“Memnis.” Feeling braver, I move forward until I’m standing before him, blanketed by his shadow. I peer up, seeking his eyes. “You must talk to me. *Please.* Don’t shut me out like this, I can’t bear it.”

When he doesn’t respond, I take the dive, needing to get a reaction of some sort.

“Don’t you want me as your mate any more?”

He jars towards me so suddenly that I jerk in surprise. His shoulders whip around, his sunken alien eyes are wide and ablaze. His mandibles spread, clacking and choking on his disbelief.

He looks over my head towards his brothers, lifting his spread claws as though seeking their support. Taking his moment of vulnerability, I sneak forward and grab him, wrapping my arms around his middle. Ninja hug! His body shudders, taken aback, but then I feel the curve of his long cock against my belly hardening further.

“Don’t do this,” I whisper against his warm chest. “Hug me, you big dumb idiot. I don’t know what’s going on in your mind right now but none of it is your fault. You are *not* to blame for any of it.”

He doesn’t hold me back, and before I can stop it my eyes start to flood with unwanted tears. My chin wobbles.

“I fell, my female,” he finally speaks, dropping his tusks to brush them against the top of my head. “I failed when I should have protected you. I should have been stronger. Faster.”

I part sob, part laugh.”Don’t be daft.” I move, pressing my chin into him whilst looking up to his face. His eyes are haunting, molten with so many troubled emotions. In this very moment, he appeared more sentiently human than ever before. My heart broke for him.

“Tell me now and swiftly, Chakria,” he begins to ask, emitting another sound like a sad puppy. “Has my worth become small in your eyes?”

“What?”

Before I can say more, he suddenly moves away from me and drops to a kneel at my feet. Holding his arms aloft, he waits there, expectantly.

I tilt my head. “What are you doing?”

With determination, he notches his chin up and visibly braces. “I am ready, my female.”

“For what?” Now he really was starting to confuse me.

“For whatever punishment you deem suitable. I shall accept it willingly and without challenge.”

An eerie chill rolls down my back, unbidden and unpleasant.

Punishment?

I glance towards Sin’Chila, my silent question obvious.

He merely shrugs. “It is the way of our people,” he explains. “When one fails to defend their home and clan, discipline must be served.”

“You’re joking, right?” I utter, more to myself than anyone else.

“Remember that our females are rare and few, little one,” Sin’Chila continues. “A female will choose only the strongest to bond and breed with her. To fail her is to be deserving of her anger and sometimes even of death itself.” At my horrified expression, he simply nods.

“What are you trying to say, exactly?”

Sin’Chila lifts a palm to me. “I leave his fate in your hands, Chakria. As is your right.”

“His fate? What? No!” I spin back to Memnis, nearly choking on my emotions. “I’m not going to *punish* him! God, why would you even think like that?”

Had the situation not have been so serious I might have laughed a little.

A thought crosses my mind then. Is this what females of their kind did to their males? Shun and attack them when they did wrong or made mistakes? I know Croydon had said they were bigger and meaner, but this… was just… *too much.*

I could never hurt them. Any of them.

“I won’t do it,” I utter with surety and Memnis cocks his head, uncertain and with a subtle hint of disappointment.

“No offence or anything, but your traditions and culture suck sometimes.” I snap, getting angrier now. These hunters were my family, so much more precious to me than my own life. “I’ve had enough of all of this *macho, gotta-be-hard* bullshit.”

Without thinking, I reach for Memnis’ broad face. I lower my forehead and press it to his, bringing us together.

“I don’t blame you for anything. Please, believe me. You did not fail me, Memnis.” I whisper his name, urgent for him to understand. “I know you tried to help me. I *know* . You wouldn’t believe how frightened I was when I saw you falling, fearing I’d lost you forever.” I place a light kiss on his right upper tusk and feel him flinch at the strange sign of affection. “I forgive you.”

He starts to purr softly and it has a relieved sigh-like quality to it.

“ *Forrgeev* ?” He tries to mimic the word, but he’s probably never heard of such a thing.

“Yes,” I nod into him. “Forgive. Can’t you see how incredibly happy I am to be home again? Isn’t that enough?”

His arms start to rise as if to wrap around me and pull me close. I want him close to me. I need it more than the very air itself. I shiver as his skin brushes mine, but as soon as the sensation is there, a large shadow appears at our side. We both turn our heads to find Sin’Chila waiting there, his expression firm and fixed on brother.

“Rise.” It is a command, brooking no refusal. “On your feet.”

I frown, uncertain of what is happening.

Memnis stands and they both tower before me.

“Your female has spoken and has decided to spare you, Brother. She is merciful, yes?” Sin’Chila rumbles.

Memnis nods solemnly in agreement. “She is.”

“She is in need,” Sin’Chila adds with some about of impatience. “And you have kept her waiting for too long…”

And then, just like that, Sin’chila reaches forward between us and cups his palm against Memnis’ groin.

I gasp, stunned. Yet Memnis shudders visibly, hissing as his own kin kneads at his covered straining cock as though it were the most natural and normal thing in the world to do.

“You ache as well, do not deny it,” Sin’Chila chides with a click. “Enough of this foolishness, Memnis. She is yours for the taking. So why do you hesitate?”

Something tears and the loincloth is pulled away to reveal Memnis’ jutting purple-headed shaft. I jerk back a step, surprised. The tip is seeping with pre-cum, dribbling down its length as claws wrap around its girth. Sin’Chila strokes him steadily, priming and forcing it to become harder.

I suck in a breath, uncertain of what to do or where to look. Jesus, I was never going to get used to this. Being sexually intimate with each other didn’t seem to phase any of them in the slightest, yet my cheeks and neck were burning like I had a fever.

Someone lightly nudges at me from behind.

“Go to him,” Yaknaur urges, his trilling tones husky with growing arousal.

I swallow thickly, peering from Sin’Chila and then to Memnis who is watching me with such vulnerable hunger. I don’t know why but I suddenly feel shy.

Sin’Chila tugs on his cock again, forcing a whine from his throat. His eyes draw partially closed but their colour brightens like a flame. He holds out his clawed hand to me, beckoning and also pleading.

A silent question.

“Take him, Chakria,” Sin’Chila coos, heavy with an urgency that makes my skin prickle with warmth. “Take your male. He is ready.”

I step closer and reach for him. Before I can even grasp what is happening, strong arms heft me up. I gasp again and panic for a beat when I realise it's not Memnis who has grabbed me, but Yaknaur.

He carries me forward, pressing me into Memnis until our chests are plastered together. His heat sears me and a jagged groan rolls through him. More firm hands guide my legs around

his middle, seating me over him. My arms go around his neck for stability as he starts to trill little pleas and promises in my ear.

“I am yours.” The chunky head of his cock finds the swollen flesh of my wet sex. “I will make amends. I swear it.”

“Stop it,” I whimper as his cock slowly grinds its way inch by inch into my clenching pussy. “No more apologising… Just take me. I need you.”

And that’s exactly what he does. In one smooth move, he pushes up into me and the wind is stolen from my lungs. His massive dick seats its way right to the neck of my womb and we both whimper.

“ *Lar-tee* ,” Memnis worships my name like one would a deity. “My *Lar-tee.* ”

Two large bodies close in around us, creating a wall of muscle and strength. Someone presses to my back and mandibles nip at my shoulder Sin’Chila strokes at my hair, watching me closely with beady luminous eyes, missing nothing. His other hand grabs for his brother's nape in a gesture of dominance.

“Look at her. Look at how she trembles...” So close now, his breath blasts against us both and his last command is aimed at me. “Accept his seed, female. It is what you want, yes?”

Unable to form coherent words, I simply nod. In and out, Memnis dives into my channel, grinding and slow, tearing tiny little noises from me that make me feel both vulnerable and powerful. He takes his time, savouring me slowly, tormenting us both. All the while Yaknaur and Sin’Chila continue to pet at us and encourage us with low yet urgent words.

“I am the luckiest of males,” Memnis part-snarls-part-trills into my throat.

I clutch him tighter, feeling the heavy muscles in his back bunching as he moves. His movements begin to grow shallow, his breathing harsh. He’s already close, ready to cum inside of me.

He rasps, “I cannot… hold it back any longer. I must…”

With a long groan, he stiffens and his cocks jerks within my tightening pussy.

“Oh, yes!” I cry out and my body starts to shudder.

My womb shudders as my flesh milks at him in hard spasms. My eyes roll and then clench shut for a moment in bliss.

“God, I’ve missed you,” I murmur languidly, rubbing my cheek across his shoulder, nuzzling in close even as he keeps himself buried inside of me.

Through the haze and pounding of my own heartbeat, I sense them moving closer. Three sets of hands rub at my back. My hips. My hair. Mandibles nip and soft clacks echo around the room; terrifying to many, but a lullaby to me.

“Welcome home, Chakria,” one of them says and I smile.

“I am home,” I repeat and then give a small tired laugh, hiding my face into Memnis’ dark dreads. Although it’s not quite the homecoming I was expecting, I’m in no way complaining.

Sin’Chila huffs a chuckle to my right. “We have been selfish males. No?” I sense rather than see him move away. “Come. We must feed you, and then you must rest. There is time for further rejoicing later.”

I nod again, too weary to argue with him. Still holding onto Memnis, he carries me back towards the pool. My body is aching and I feel like I could sleep for a week, but nothing could beat how happy I felt then as I did in this very moment.

With a sigh of contentment, I burrow into Memnis throat and mumble something. I don’t know if they can hear me, and I doubt they understand it, but I say it anyway.

“I love you.”

Chapter 35

The days blend into one another, one after the other, and a strange sort of peace overcomes me. Life returns, slowly but surely, to a place of familiarity, as though the entire incident with the other humans hadn't even occurred to begin with. Back within the safety of the ship and with my hunters, I find myself content once again. I eat. I sleep. I live life as comes and take every day in its stride.

Lost in my thoughts, I sit by one of the stations, staring out of the large window ahead as the trio continue with their tasks around the deck. The world beyond is vast and colourful. The sky is pink like a lady's blush and the vibrant trees sway in an unfelt breeze. With my legs tucked beneath me, I sigh and let my pondering deepen.

It's funny how one can miss a certain way of existing, even if that lifestyle isn't overly exciting or full of activity. Little moments like this, just sitting and observing the ever-changing planet around me is enough to keep me occupied for hours. It's foreign and dangerous, and yet, in its own way, beautiful. So different to Earth. Here, there is no law or society to dictate one's existence. There was no such thing as bills. No taxes. None of that human life applied here and yet living never felt empty. I'd found more fullness being here than I had ever felt living in a thriving, bustling city.

My Yautja's are proud and possessive creatures (as if I didn't know that already), more so than usual. They guard me almost constantly, ever watchful and become worried if I so much as bang a toe or sneeze. One of them is always at my side and when we are together we are as one person. One unit. A family. That is… until they start bickering with each other.

Like now.

"I will teach him to hunt!" Yaknaur boasts loudly, thudding a fist against the metal tabletop. "We both know that I am the strongest. I should do it!"

Memnis snorts. "You could not track a *Grogin* stag even if it strode up to you, Yaknaur."

"You doubt my abilities, runt?"

"Of course." Comes the laughed retort. "We all know who is the best tracker here. The quickest. The stealthiest. It should be *my* task to train our *Kava.* My skills are unequalled."

Yaknaur throws out a curse in clear disagreement.

Drawn by their noise behind me, I rotate my head to look at them, shaking my head at their antics. I glance to Sin'Chila who grunts, sharing my amusement. If a Yautja could roll his eyes, I had no doubt that's what he'd be doing right now.

"And tell me, *Brother* ," Yaknaur sneers, stepping closer to tower over his younger sibling, all muscle and power. "When the Clan of *Brak'Nen* had attacked and taken you captive all

those winters ago, who was it that had come to your rescue and saved your useless hide? Was it not I?"

" *Nej* . No." Memnis snaps back, rising to his full height as well in challenge. "Twas not your strength that felled the other males, but your stink alone. It is enough to send even the most fearsome of beasts running."

"Tshk!" Yaknaur spits, lunging forward. "I shall have your guts for that insult!"

Random furniture bangs and slides as they dive for each other, wrestling and tumbling about the room. Sin'Chila barks at them, trying to part the two with his words alone but they fall on deaf ears. For a moment, I watch them fight it out, noting that despite their aggression they were taking it easy with one another.

A long stretch of time passes and when my bladder starts to ache in complaint, I rise to my feet. The three are too focused on one another to notice when I slip away and away from the deck. The door swishes open and I head for the 'bathroom'. Well, it's not exactly what you'd call a five-star salle de bain. It was nothing more than a hole in the floor where one had to squat to relieve themselves. Yep, not dignified at all, but it was better than nothing, I guess.

I complete my business and then wave my hand over the sensor nearby, causing the grate-like contraption to empty.

I head back out, intending to return to the others, only to pause in the corridor. Something stirs. A wind. A feeling. My head turns as a cool breeze filters against my skin. The ramp is down and I can see the brightness of the jungle outside almost calling to me. The suns are bright and the humidity is strong today, yet I feel the overwhelming need to go out and get some fresh air.

Quietly, I head out and lightly step down it until my bared toes bury into the crisp teal grass below. Straightening, I take a deep breath, enjoying the feeling of the light wind that dances throughout the clearing.

I know inwardly that the others would be unhappy that I'd come out here alone, but all I wanted was a minute, just *one moment* to clear my head and breathe.

Absently, I rub at my belly, my peace complete. I stand there for a beat, soaking up the sun, allowing it to bathe me, before finally turning back towards the ship. My foot lands on the ramp…And then I hear something move from behind me.

A rustling. Like leaves brushing together in disturbance. There is something nearby.

I whip back around and peer into the shadowed wilderness warily. There's so much bright leafage everywhere that it's hard to figure out where one tree ends and another begins. I edge towards one of the bushes, pausing a few paces away and take a closer look. I see nothing, nothing at all, yet warning bells ring within me as my skin prickles in awareness.

Hsssk. It sounds again, overhead this time, followed by a loud shrilling cry. It cuts shorts just as quickly as it comes and an eerie silence follows.

Uneasy, I start to turn, ready to retreat back to safety…

Only to stiffen as something heavy drops down behind me. The air stirs at my back and the ground vibrates a little. I hear the telltale sound of even but deep breathing.

But what is it? Or rather… who?

Heart in my throat, I slowly rotate to face it...

Darvik's POV

He watches her from afar, a certain sense of anticipation licking at his blood. For many nights He had waited for the female to emerge without her males. The perfect opportunity.

The warship they resided in was old, possibly one passed down through many generations and fathers before them. He had seen many alike it in his time; the same layout, the same build. He observed every area of interest, each entrance and blind spot to be used for his advantage. The protective force shield surrounding their den was strong but had a flaw in itself. From his scanning of the ships diagnostics, he could see it covered much ground space save for the farthest rear end of the eastern flank. Even now, from his position within the treetops he knew it could not find him; the hunters within were oblivious to his presence.

A slow grin splits across Darvik's face, pleased with himself. It fades just as quickly, turning into a solemn frown.

Why was he here? Why had he come? Even he did not know. Logic told him that following the group had been a foolish endeavour. Any other hunter would have accepted his defeat and retreated.

But *nej*. Never he. Darvik was never one to back down from a fight or admit when he had been bested; his pride was too great for that. His eagerness to fight was all that was left for him. A test of his mettle. A need to prove his worth, if only to himself.

Then what are you waiting for? An inner voice mocks. *Why do you hesitate?*

With a half-sneer, his focus returns to the *hooman* below . He lifts a paw to scratch at his chin, catching against the thickened scars there.

The male hunters were his enemy, it was them that he sought, and any who stood with them were also his foe; which included the tiny female as well. Yes?

I'm Sorry, Darvik. The memory of her voice comes to him. Her words had been soft to his senses, as though she had intended to try and ease him somehow. A foreign thing. He had not wanted her pity, yet she had felt so small and willing when he had carried her against his breast. *So warm.*

His head tilts as he watches her further. Uncertain. For many days he had anticipated this moment, waiting for the female to appear. The others coveted her greedily, always keeping guard and close to her like a pack of loyal hounds.

Until now…

And here she was. In the open. Her red hair billows in the wind, bright like a beacon of fire, making her easy to follow with his keen sight. What fools they were, to allow her to wander so far away from their protection, especially when she carried their spawn. Unguarded and alone.

When something moves within the treetops, she stills as though sensing a predator nearby. Her scent thickens as fear laces through it, reminding him of something hunted. Of prey.

He sees that which has set its gaze upon her. The *griso* crouches low, crawling down towards the unsuspecting fleshling. The eight-legged arachnid is so close now, hovering over her position, ready to strike. Soon it would attack with its killing sting and its target would not even have the chance to flee or cry out for aid. A quick but possibly painful death.

The creature lunges but Darvik moves faster. He launches across the space, twisting in mid-air, before slamming down upon his target with precision. His blade flashes in the light before burying deep into the creatures brain cavity. It emits a shriek of pain and its legs thrash in struggle. The strike is deadly. Within a mere beat, it seizes all movement. Defeated. Dead.

Oblivious, the female peers into his direction and Darvik huffs. Even now she cannot see him. Her senses are weak, not at all like his own. She is so close now, easily within reach. Easy to corner.

She begins to turn towards the ship and something within him tightens, reluctant to allow her to escape. Taking his chance, and without further thought, he launches from his hiding spot and leaps down towards her...

“You,” I whisper, both with awe and dread.

At first glance sheer terror had gripped me at the male hunter’s sudden appearance, yet it quickly turned to surprise as soon as I recognised his face. I could have been in a crowd of his kind and would have easily spotted him amongst the mass. With his giant stature, silvery scars and amber lizard-like skin; he wasn’t someone you could easily miss. Not at all.

I inch back a step, uneasy. Of their own accord, my eyes slide towards the ramp, trying to mentally calculate my chances of reaching it before he had the chance to grab for me. My estimation came to ‘zero’. Absolutely nil.

Finding my voice, I ask him nervously, “What are you doing here?”

I didn't really want to know the answer; I was afraid of what it would be. Whatever the reason, it couldn't be good.

"Y-you need to leave," I stammer, trying to not tremble under the weight of his fierce scowl. His shadow pretty much blankets me as he stands there, towering like a tree in my way between here and the safety of home. "If the others find you here they'll kill you." I attempt diplomacy, hoping he'd see reason and peacefully leave without a fuss.

He ignores my subtle plea and prowls closer, stalking me across the space as his massive tail whips back and forth behind him like a restless serpent. There is something in his gaze, something dark and predatory, and it makes my insides curl in some bizarre response. My pulse starts to thud heavily within my ears.

"Wait," I plead, holding up a hand even as he continues his steady approach.

A full rush of panic sweeps at me like a wave. Was he going to attack me?

The need for fight or flight forces me into action and I make a mad dash towards the left. I barely make it a few steps when a set of heavy arms snag around my middle and out of instinct I crumple, curling into a defensive ball as a yelp leaves my throat.

"Help!"

His hold tightens.

"Sin'Chil—!" I start to call his name, only to choke on it when the world suddenly spins.

I'm spun and my back meets with a heated broad chest. An equally large roughened palm covers over my mouth, muffling my cry. The male at my back is like a bear, swallowing my smaller body within his to the point where I feel as helpless as a child.

"Enough, female." It's snarled into my ear. A hot breath blasts across the side of my temple and I try not to shiver as one of his tusks catches against my hair. "Be still."

Unable to do little else, I still completely. My whimper morphs into a sigh of relief when he eventually removes his paw from my face.

"Please…" I whisper, barely keeping my shit together at this point. "What do you want? Why are you here?"

He doesn't reply. At least, not at first. He's just as stiff and awkward as I am, like he's unsure of what to do next. He finally relents and releases me from his embrace.

At the last moment, he inhales deep… and smells me.

What the…

The movement is so brief that I would have probably missed it if not for the fact I was in hyper-alert mode. As soon as it happens, he sets me free and I rush forward to create some space between us. My skin is prickling as I whirl, facing him again with widened eyes.

I have no idea what's happening. He shouldn't be here. He can't be. After all I had done to practically beg to have his life spared? Does the guy have a death wish or something?

"Just go," I utter shakily. I don't know why I feel so afraid. Was it for myself? For him? His sudden appearance has thrown me into a whirlpool of confusion.

Darvik tilts his head, his one coloured eye flashing brightly with cunning. "Why? To please your males? I think not."

My silence speaks volumes of my unease. I shuffle foot to foot, trying to think of a way to get past him and back inside.

"I see that they have allowed you some freedom. A grave error on their part," Darvik says then, with some mockery. The grass beneath his massive webbed feet makes the smallest of sounds as he edges nearer. "Now you are alone and with no one to protect you."

His words send a chill down my back. Fear must flash across my face as his own expression shifts, losing some of its cruel edge.

"I find it of great interest..." he says out of the blue, but no longer harshly. His tone seems almost curious.

"W-what?"

" *Chakria* , they call you." He pauses in his approach. Even with a good space still between us, I have to crane my neck back to look at him. "Tell me, *Taz'arin.* Which of those dogs did you breed with? Which of them did you allow to mate with you?"

Heat creeps up my neck. "That is none of your business." My voice comes out like a squawk.

"Surely not the small one," he speaks again, ignoring my response. He appears thoughtful for a beat as though truly wanting to know the answer. "He seems weaker than the other two, I doubt he would appeal to you."

My back straightens, hating the fact that he's speaking shit about one of my hunters.

I clench my jaw tight. "If you must know, I chose all three of them. They are *all* my mates, in every sense of the word."

Darvik snorts, partly in disgust. Curiosity once again wins and his next whispered question is somewhat child-like in wonder.

"You allowed all three to claim you?"

I sigh, becoming fed up with his interrogation. What did any of it have to do with him, anyway? Why did he want to know?

When I don't answer straight away, he continues, uttering lowly. "You do not fear their touch. I have seen you. You cling to them like a youngling and submit willingly without question."

I lift my chin a notch. “That’s because I trust them… with my life.”

Darvik grunts, somewhat displeased by my answer. He straightens to his full intimidating height, only to then slide forward another step, bringing us easily within arms reach of one another. He doesn’t grab for me again. Instead, he chooses to simply stare down at me, his mismatched eyes eerily heavy on my person like a physical weight.

“Yet you fear *me* .” It sounds like an accusation coming from his splaying mouth. Just when I’m about to retort, he cuts in again. “You cannot lie, for my sense of smell does not deceive me.” He leans over, lifting a clawed hand, allowing it to hover over the swell of my breasts, directly above my heart. Although he doesn’t touch me, my skin ripples and his heat finds me even through the fabric of my top. “Your *hooman* heart beats so loudly, even now.”

I dare not move, dared not to even breathe.

I lick at my dry lips, not entirely sure of what I’m feeling at this moment in time. Despite what he’d said, I didn’t hate him. I mean, sure, he made me nervous, but part of me wanted to believe he wouldn’t try to harm me. Had he have wanted to he would have done so by now, even back when I had been taken by him.

“Darvik…” I whisper his name, gathering my courage. “Again, I’ll ask. Why are you here?”

“To watch,” he finally says after a long unnerving pause.

I lift a brow and then echo. “To watch?”

Darvik nods but his stare has dropped down to my stomach now, peering at it openly with a burning interest. On instinct, I lift a hand to cover it.

“I wish to learn and know my enemy.”

“What do you want from us?”

The question seems to irritate him. His mandibles snap wide into a snarl.

“I want *nothing* from *them* !”

Just as anxiety surges up through my shoulders at his anger, I realise something.

Them, he’d said... But not *you* .

“Am I your enemy too?” For some reason, the idea that he does hurts me. I couldn’t rightly explain why, only that it was there and a solid concern in my mind.

We weren’t exactly best buddies. We barely knew each other at all, but we had shared some fleeting moments together. He’d even fought and tried to protect me when my hunters had come to rescue me.

There was some gentleness in him. Some good. I’d seen it with my own eyes. If, albeit, briefly.

“I… do not know...”

At his soft tone, my head snaps up. His words trail into a quietness that I can almost feel across my skin. My eyes connect to his. His face is but a mere few inches away from mine, monstrous and yet familiar in its strangeness.

“You are,” he adds lowly, on a breath. “And yet, you are not.” His head inclines and causes a thick dark lock to slide against his massive shoulder. “You are a strange creature, *Taz’arin* .”

“ *Tay-Zar-Reen* ?” I try to mimic awkwardly. “You keep calling me that. What does it mean?”

He huffs and his eyes dance with amusement.

I half expect him to say it means something derogative, like ‘pitiful human’ or ‘weakling’.

“It means, *little flame.* ” A long blackened claw slips under my hair, drawing out a long ribbony lock between us. The light catches against it, making it appear all shades of red. Like fire. “Small, yet indistinguishable,” he adds.

Oh.

That takes me by surprise. Like, a lot. His obvious compliment is even somewhat poetic. Some of my anxiety fades and absently I notice that his thick spiky tail has slithered its way around behind me Its heat finds my back, a barrier to prevent my escape, and yet light. On instinct, my hand lands on it and he shudders, the scales there shimmering at the contact. It feels like a snake; sleek and undulating with a life of its own. Part of me reasons that I should be disgusted by it, yet I’m not. Instead, I stare down at its coiling length with interest.

Darvik’s breath breezes against the top of my head.

I swallow thickly. “You should go.” I pretty much whisper as my voice seems to abandon me.

“I should take you from them.”

My eyes fly up to his in alarm. My sense of calm is ruined, replaced once again by an itching dread.

His own eyes flare in their sunken sockets, glittering with something mischievous.

“Yes, what a great victory that would be,” he trills.

I push back and attempt to wriggle from his hold. “No, you can’t do that.”

His mottled brow plummets into a displeased frown. “And why not?” He sounds almost offended. “I am not a cruel male. I will build you many fires and feed you well.” His focus returns to my stomach. “Your youngling will become mine and we shall breed many more…”

Um...What?

I choke on the air in surprise. “Ugh, No. I don’t think so.” I push against him again, but his tail keeps me in place. It suddenly weaves around my middle like a python, heavy and warm like an arm.

He hisses, flaring his jaw, but it is not with malice or threat. He seems to be almost teasing me as his expression dances between amusement and that notorious scowl of his.

A claw lifts, hovering near my cheek and I stiffen on impulse. Our bodies are so close their we’re almost chest to abdomen.

“ *Taz’arin…”* he says it. Softly. Almost with tenderness. “I…”

Before he can finish his words, a strange humming sizzles through the air. It grows louder. Something flashes, heading our way from behind Darviks left side. He stiffens, hearing it too. One minute I’m stood right in front of him, the next he’s flinging me away, the wind slamming from my lungs at his harsh shove. With a snarl, he spins towards the thing coming towards him.

I land on the ground, startled. The *thing* flashes into being, spreading out wide before wrapping around Darvik’s muscular body like a tightly fitted glove. The net tightens on impact, its material searing into life with electricity, shocking and zapping at its captive within. Darvik’s roar is deafening as he drops to his knees as its current renders him into a writhing mess.

“Cowards!” He curses aloud, clawing at the metallic meshing with all his might.

Seemingly, out of nowhere, Memnis launches down from somewhere within the treetops. He lands silently a few steps away, a snarl curling across his alien face. Silvery outlines waver and then solidify to take two familiar figures stepping forward from the shadows. Without a word, Yaknaur and Sin’Chila approach, eyeing their foe with obvious hatred.

Someone moves and then Memnis is at my side, gathering me into his hold protectively.

“Chakria.” He leans down and nudges at me with his tusks. “Are you harmed?”

“I’m fine.” I rise to my feet, my attention fixed on Sin’Chila as he extends his spear with menacing purpose. “Please! Sin’Chila! Don’t! He wasn’t trying to hurt me!”

I can already sense what’s coming. They’ll kill him for certain this time, I just know it.

“The mighty *Vindas,”* Sin’Chil growls at Darvik, who is still thrashing within the trap. The air is hot and the sound of flesh sickeningly being burnt makes my stomach churn. “We have been waiting for you. We knew it would only be a matter of time before you would reveal yourself.”

It hits me. “You knew he was here?” I ask him and then look to Memnis, before rolling my eyes.

Yeah. Of course these guys would know if there was an outsider nearby. What on earth was I thinking? These guys were skilled hunters. They saw and knew everything.

Sin'Chila is all but gloating down upon the other male, pleased with himself.

My chin trembles with emotion as I watch Darvik struggle against his bindings without success. His roars of pain are eating away me, feeding me with a guilt that brings vomit up into my throat.

You idiot. I think to him. *You should have just stayed away.*

Yaknaur moves forward, drawing the blades from his wrist guard.

"Yaknaur, no! He's already down! There's no need to keep attacking him!"

Both of them ignore my pleas. Taking it in turns, Yaknaur and Sin'Chila prowl around Darvik like two vultures circling a corpse. One after the other, they take swipes at him, attacking from all sides, slashing and beating at him to the point where he slumps to the floor in a heap.

"What will you do now, heathen?" Yaknaur mocks, crouching low beside him fallen enemy. "Come. Where has your courage fled to? Fight me now… *if you can* ."

Fallen, Darvik growls something, and I only just managed to hear what he says.

"I will not… bend... to you."

I hated this so much. For what seems like a lifetime, they torment him further and something ugly curls within my belly at the sight of it all. My males hoot and preen in victory yet all I feel right now is disgust at what they're doing. They're enjoying this too much.

A sound of distress leaves my throat and Darvik lifts his head, his eyes finding mine; one white, one bright like a star. Gleaming. He offers me a slow blink, like that of a cat. It's almost as if he's trying to tell me something. A second later he collapses back to the ground, defeated and unconscious.

Horrified, my gaze rises to Sin'Chila, who has been watching our silent exchange for a brief moment. His attention is fierce, missing nothing, seeing all. Almost knowing.

Knelt there, I plead to him silently.

Please… Stop this. He's had enough. You've won.

And just like that, it's done. Sin'Chila lifts a darkened paw and all becomes still.

"Enough, brother," he orders lowly, not yet having taken his gaze from mine. "Our work here is done. Take him inside."

Yaknaur strides towards Darvik and disengages the net. With frightening ease, he starts to drag the larger male by his legs, drawing him towards the ramp and up into the ship.

None of them speak. They say nothing to me. Memnis holds me closer but it brings no comfort. Only one thought remains.

What were they going to do to him now?

Chapter 36

I cannot sleep the entire night. Time drags and each hour is spent worrying about Darvik and of what my hunters have planned for him. My answers come soon enough the moment I step out onto the main deck the following rising dawn. He's there, caged and chained like an animal; an eerily familiar and disturbing sight. A sense of deja vu hits me as I walk through the door and stare at him, unease tugging at my chest. He looks worse for wear, with dried glowing blood and cuts decorating his coppery flesh. Like a lion, he paces within the huge metal cell that contains him. His eyes are fixed on the three Yautja warriors working about the stations nearby who are totally oblivious and uncaring to his hatred.

I whisper a sigh of relief; it was something, at least. At least they hadn't killed him. Which had been my worst fear.

You stupid idiot, I think to him silently, watching him for a beat. *You shouldn't have followed us*. I don't know how to help him at this point. This is the second time now that my males have come face to face with this hunter. The first time they'd miraculously spared him. But this time…? My mind was in chaos at the possibilities.

Warmth slides across my side out of nowhere and a large shadow covers me from the left. I rotate my head and finally notice that Memnis is now stood at my side.

"*Chakria*," he trills, strangely content considering the situation. "You have awakened."

Towering there, he leans down to gently nuzzle against the side of my face. His leathery jaws skim my temple, rough and yet decidedly warm. He smells strong, like a smoking fire and soil. Wild. He huffs in Darvik's direction, gesturing with a ripple of his mandibles.

"Do you see?"

I frown, unsure of what he's talking about until I see his brightened gaze dropping to the floor near the cage. I peer closer to see luminous red lines throbbing with light across the ground there. They surround its perimeter, like a warning for all who comes near.

"What is--" I start.

"Keep your distance, my *Lar-tee."* He rubs his face against the top of my hair again, purring lightly with a note of concern. "You must keep away, never cross those boundaries. He is a dangerous male."

I bite my lip, part of me wanting to tell him that Darvik is not a threat, to just let him go, but then Darvik's gaze flashes up and finally meets mine from across the space. His stark mismatched eyes are angry; to put it mildly. So heavy with violence and fury. I feel both dread and doubt worm their way into my mind.

His low snarl echoes, striking me straight to the core of my being. Unconsciously, I step sideways into Memnis, seeking his heated chest.

“Why hold him here?” I ask finally, my voice low. “You can’t keep him like this forever.”

Memnis shrugs. “I know not of what is in my brother's mind. His intentions are a mystery, even to me.”

At this point, we both look towards Sin’Chila and Yaknaur who are both leaning over and tampering with something near one of the control panels. Their massive backs are facing us and I can’t help but admire the pair, noting the power and strength of their muscles on display. Something within curls, restless, causing me to shiver with awareness.

“We must be careful, *Chakria*,” Memnis adds lowly, his huge paw sliding across my shoulder to cup the back of my nape. “Be cautious. Keep away from the male. Yes?”

Unable to deny him, I nod up at him, briefly taking in his monstrous face I’d come to adore. “Ok.” It’s all I offer, but it’s enough. He nods and then slowly steps away from me.

“Good.” He straightens and starts to head for his brothers, but not before saying to me with a mangled grin. “I believe it is my turn to watch you this day, my female. I will check to see what our brother has planned. Wait here.”

With that, he strides back towards them and the other two males turn to acknowledge his presence. Memnis stands shorter than his kin, yet together they make a formidable trio. They speak in low tones, nodding back and forth. My eyes, of their own violation, slide towards the cell nearby. An angry gnarled face stares back at me and the skin down my back prickles. Alert. There is something in Darvik’s expression that's somewhat different in the way that he watches my hunters. For them, his glare is lethal and filled with hatred. Yet, whenever those cunning eyes fall upon me they seem to both burn and soften. Disturbing and intriguing.

For a long while, we stare at each other. Smoothly, he rises from his crouch into a full stand; a display of strength. Incredibly tall, his head almost reaches the top of his cage, which is far too small for him. His chest flexes and the scaly flesh across his shoulders ripple, seeming to almost darken in shade. Or perhaps it was a trick of the lighting overhead? He growls out a noise and I’m not quite sure as to what threat lies behind it.

Does he hate me too, then? I can’t help but wonder. Am I now his enemy as well? I don’t know why but the thought upsets me a little.

He doesn’t blink, doesn’t look away even for a second. It is me that has to drop my gaze to the floor at my feet. I feel ashamed to see him like this, trapped like a wild animal. I’d never wanted this to happen. But then what could I have done? I was only a human. He had come here of his own choice and had refused to leave, even though I’d all but begged him to. My frustrations grow with each passing second just thinking about it.

A large clawed hand snags onto mine and I jump out of my thoughts, startled. Memnis clasps my fingers, gentle but firm, suddenly at my side again.

“Come.” He guides me further into the room, his large size almost swamping my smaller one. “They plan to hunt for a while. We shall stay here.”

Before I have a chance to respond, another set of arms sweep me up against a massive chest.

“Hmm,” a voice purrs as a face burrows into my neck. “We shall not be long, my mate. Already, I am eager to return to you.”

I shift in the male's arms and look down into his angular alien face. I smile down as Yaknaur’s body vibrates against me in pleasure.

“Don’t drop me,” I say it, more out of instinct than anything else. Being so far from the ground never seized to make me feel a little unsteady, but I knew deep down he wouldn’t let me fall.

Yaknaur snorts. “Your fears are unfounded, my female. This warrior is strong.” He tightens his arms gently as though to prove a point, hefting me closer. “Surely you know this by now.”

“Yaknaur,” Sin’Chila speaks, appearing at his side with a frown of displeasure. “Put her down. She is not a youngling.”

Doing as bade, Yaknaur slowly lower me back to my feet, but not before nipping at my throat one more time with his heavy tusks.

He grunts and turns to his brother. “You just want her for yourself, oh greedy one.”

Without answering, Sin’Chila steps forward and he leans down, swamping me with his nearby, causing my senses to whirl for a beat. His glittering eyes stare deeply into mine, knowing me on a level that no mere human man ever could.

“Be sure to watch over our youngest, *Chakria,* for he is all trouble and mischief…” He glances briefly to Memnis who huffs, indignant, puffing his chest out in offence. “We shall return swiftly. His large hand finds my rounding belly, cupping against it in a possessive fashion. I nod and the two of them move away, leaving me feeling oddly bereft, even though Memnis remains beside me.

“Keep safe,” Sin’chila says to me before nodding to his younger brother. “Be vigilant.”

Without further goodbyes, Yaknaur and Sin’Chila walk away from us, cloaks fluttering and spears in hand. They stride through the sliding metal door and duck away out of sight.

A brief silence passes, the room echoing with it. I open my mouth to speak, only to emit a small yelp when large hands grasp at my hips, dragging me down onto an equally huge lap. Before I know it, I’m plopped down, pressed back against a broad warm chest. Like a child, Memnis cuddles me close. His thickened arms band around me, drawing my back further into him. My ass sits perfectly into the V of his groin as he leans down, sniffing and rubbing into my hair like a content needy cat.

“Finally,” he chirps with playful heat. “I have you all to myself. At last.”

I huff a laugh and a smile spreads across my lips. “Memnis, if you hug me any tighter I may not be able to breathe.”

“Nej, my female,” he chitters back but loosens his hold a smidgen. “I could never harm you. You are far too precious to me. I am only but eager to feel your warmth.”

Something inside of me melts and I lean into him, stroking my hand across his thickened forearm, which is snug across my waist.

“Is it wrong of me to covet you like this?” He asks, and I shake my head. If any, I loved how clingy he could be sometimes. It made me feel special and wanted.

“Of course not.” I reach back and blindly find his jutting jawbone, petting it lovingly. “I am yours and you are mine. I love being close to you.”

“*Lurrv.*” He echoes the word, uncertain, yet doesn’t ask about what it means.

Memnis purrs again and continues to nip and rub at me as though trying to smear his very essence against my skin. I smile even wider, biting back a laugh.

I sigh, content, and shift to face forward again, only for my heart to stall a beat as I realise we have an audience. Darvik is watching us from the shadows of his cage, silent and as still as a statue. His one whitened eye is like pure snow searing into us.

Wait, no. Not Memnis too... Just *me.*

His stare is unmoving, unblinking. Memnis seems oblivious and only hugs me further, preening and cooing like a puppy wanting affection. My belly knots, somewhat anxious and with awareness. When Darvik’s head tilts, I suddenly feel naked, like an insect on display. I keep dropping my gaze, back and forth, trying to find a place to put them, yet every time they go back to him, equally as intrigued.

I shift within Memnis’ embrace. What is he staring at, exactly? It’s kinda starting to freak me out. He doesn’t say anything, doesn’t make even a single sound.

A roughened hand finds my thigh and I gasp at the contact. It slides up and drawing my worn-out t-shirt up in the process. Because of the daytime humidity, it’s the only thing I’m wearing today, that and my underwear. My legs are bare and on display. And whilst the idea of flashing flesh hadn’t bothered me at all before...

It certainly was now.

Claws graze my skin causing goosebumps as Memnis leans further against my back, curling over me. His hot breath fans my ear, making me squirm in his lap.

“Memnis.” I breathe his name, unable to help myself.

His paw slips up further, under fabric to cup my small but aching breast. In the process, my midriff is exposed, along with my panties. His thumb finds my nipple, coasting across it until it forms into a throbbing peak.

I arch. “Wait…” It comes out a harsh whisper. “Don't… *He's* watching.”

And just like that, the atmosphere of the room swells, becoming thick. Memnis hisses, lifting his head to finally take notice of the other hunter quietly observing us from afar.

Darvik utters a rumbling growl in return from the shadows, not even once taking his focus from me.

“He cannot reach you, precious one,” Memnis coos to me, but also somewhat mockingly to the other male. “You are mine. *My* female.”

“I—”

My words cut off as his big fingers pinch at my nipple again, making me gasp even louder. My hips roll as heat and wetness settles between my now quivering thighs.

“Perhaps we should wait,” I say, trembling. Uncertain.

In response, Memnis lifts me a little, shifting me over his lap as though I weigh nothing more than a small sack of flour. With another trill, he lowers his hand down to the V of my groin. He cups me there, using his other arm to keep me from wriggling away from him.

“Let me play with you, my mate.” His strong legs drift open, pulling mine apart as well to allow his touch to slip into my panties. He grazes across the swollen folds of my sex and whines, almost pleading. “My *cros* aches for you. Can you not feel it?”

How could I not? His long throbbing cock is straining against my ass even now, heavy and hard like a rod. I lick at my lips, eager to feel more of him, wanting a taste.

“Not now.” My attention flies back to the huge male behind the bars. “Not while there’s someone…” I trail off, unable to finish as a clawed digit skims against my entrance, pressing against it, seeking entry. My pussy flutters, ready to suck him into me. Greedy. “Oh, please!”

“Let me soothe you,” Memnis says, slipping away from my hole to circle around my clitoris. He rubs it, teasing. Playing. “I am here. You have nothing to fear with me.” He dips lower to utter lowly against my ear. “He cannot reach you… even if he wanted to.”

I shudder, hard. And I’m not entirely sure as to why. My body hums as Memnis plays with me, tormenting me with delicious promises. I find Darvik’s face again, noting that despite the darkness encasing him, his bulk is taut and straining with power. I can almost taste something in the air, coming from him. Something dangerous. I feel so aroused and part of me wants to surrender to my mate's touch, but I can’t. Darvik’s eyes won't let me. They’re burning, consuming me whole, like a fire.

A sound comes from the cell. Long and heady. An inhale of breath, scenting the air, followed by a hiss; predatory in sound.

With a whimper, I jolt upwards, straight out of Memnis’ arms and onto my feet. I hastily straighten at my clothing, cheeks burning. Memnis, startled, starts to rise too, but I hold out a hand to still him.

“It’s fine. I’m Ok,” I gush, seemingly out of breath. “I just need a minute. I’ll be right back.”

I can sense Memnis’ confusion, almost as if it were my own. Without a further word, I head for the door, not really knowing where I plan to go.

I cautiously pass by the bars and a hulking shape follows from within, stalking me from the other side. Surprise startles me but I don’t look at him. I don’t dare to. Instead, I feel him, mirroring me step for step until the barriers prevent his further progress. Darvik snarls and I pick up my pace.

What is wrong with him? What is wrong with me?

My skin is burning up, feverish. And as I head through the door I can still feel two sets of heavy eyes following my movements. I need air.

With that thought in mind, I leave the deck, with my heart pounding in my chest as I go.

Darvik’s POV

Her scent. It is heady upon the air, clinging to his every sense, causing something within to stir. Restless. The female's little whines had ensnared him, her eagerness for her mate clear. She desires the warrior; a phenomenon he had never truly believed until now. A Yautja... and a human. His eyes did not deceive him. Their arousals are thick and tormenting, reminding him of the very thing he did not have but craved the most.

A mate. Willing. Accepting. This little *Taz’arin* was becoming more and more dangerous to him. Even now.

Her skin had captured him with its smoothness. Her body sleek and so small, writhing in the other males grasp. Needy.

With a groan, Darvik watches her flee from the room, his own *cros* swollen. Unbidden. Unwanted. His weakness was showing greatly, something that he could not further allow, yet he could deny his want.

When the two had rubbed together, his greedy eyes had missed nothing. The vision of her flaming hair lingered. Her eyes had kept coming to him, seeking him out.

“*Grekt*,” he swears lowly, his tail swishing out behind him with growing agitation.

Need. It was there, demanding his attention, refusing to be denied. Every ounce of his being wanted relief, wanted…

Darvik snaps his jaws tight, refusing to even utter the thought within his mind. He would not. He would never bend, no matter how fierce the fires in loins burned. The ache in his powerful breast.

Of envy.

“Why do you follow my female, hunter?”

Suddenly, he is there. The youngest male of the three. *Mem-nisk,* as they call him. Their eyes meet, fighting for a beat, challenging the other in its silence. The young blood stands tall, refusing to back away despite their difference in size. Darvik’s claws clench and then flex, eager to render flesh.

The other hunter smells of the *hooman*. Her sweetness clings to him, adding further rage to Darvik’s displeasure.

He does not answer. He refuses to bow to his enemy.

“Your eyes hunt her,” *Mem-nisk* adds coolly again, stepping closer. “Why?”

Darvik’s eyes narrow as he juts his chin with stubborn pride. “She is nothing. Merely prey.”

“You may lie to yourself but not to me.”

Darvik snorts back, masking his expression carefully. He would not give this pup any leverage, no way to control him. “She is a *hooman*. A worthless creature.”

The others gaze narrow, yet he remains firm. Memnis crosses his arms and leans back. “My brother offered you leniency and yet still you returned here. You should be dead. And the only reason you are not is because of that *worthless creature* you keep speaking of.”

Darvik huffs again, amused. This male may be smaller than the others but he had courage; he would give him that, with respect.

“I do not need protection,” Darvik says, thumping at his chest to make his point clear. “I need *no one*.”

“So I see.” Memnis cocks a gnarled brow, gesturing towards the cage. “I will say this but once, *Vindas*... Should you attempt to wound even one hair upon my females head, I will--”

“You will what?” Darvik’s turns to face him once again. His shoulder square, sensing a threat. “What will you do, I ask? What *can* you do? You are no match against me, not without the aid of your kin, at least.” He mocks.

This young blood insults him and struts like a bull. Despite his intention to protect his mate, this pup would not win against a hunter like him. They both knew it.

When no response comes, Darvik huffs and turns to face the wall. Dismissive. This conversation was over. “I have said it once before and I will say it again, I will never bow to you. I do not answer to any of you here.”

Heavy footsteps echo, leading away from him. The door slides open but then a voice reaches him once again.

“You may not bow, *Vindas*, but you will obey. Your fate has yet to be decided, and until that time comes, you are here. You are our captive.”

Darvik stiffens, pride surging hot and fast. He remains still, like stone. Untouchable.

“Never.” Is all he replies with.

The other male leaves him then, alone with the quietness of the deck, echoing and hollow. An eerily familiar companion he had come to both appreciate and hate.

“Never,” he says it again, breathing deep, looking up towards the ceiling of his new hell.

He would *never* obey.

Chapter 37

The water trickles down my back and thighs and I feel myself shudder at its light touch. The bathing suite around me is empty, echoing the soft waves of the pool. I scoop up more of the water and pour over my chest and belly, pausing to stroke at my growing bump there, lost in thought. It's been a few days now since any of my males have attempted to touch me. Frustration has been my companion since then, making me feel doubtful. Since that day with Darvik watching Memnis and me getting *cosy* together on the deck, I can't seem to settle. I both yearn for them and push them away at every opportunity; a strange and confusing dance. At night I lie in our nest cuddled between them, wanting to be close to them, only to then remind myself of the other hunter locked in the cage on our deck. Shame and guilt gnaw at me, preventing me from getting any true rest. I don't know what to do about the situation. Everything feels strained and awkward. My hormones are all over the place; due to the pregnancy too, no doubt. Instead of seeking out my mates, I would come here now, to the bathing pools to find some kind of relief from my frustrations.

I slip my hand down between my thighs and rub at my already swollen clitoris. It doesn't take long. Even though I've already pleasured myself multiple times this morning, I'm still so hypersensitive, needing more. Needing my men.

I shudder as another orgasm hits, but it feels weak and empty at this point. It only dampens my horniness a smidgen.

"Oh, for crying out loud," I sigh and lift a hand to rub at my brow. "Get a grip, Lottie. What the hell is wrong with you lately?" My voice echoes back to me, mocking in its solitude.

I peer down into water around my naked body, but instead of seeing my own face, another appears. Ghastly. Beastly. With mismatched eyes; one glowing one white.

"Oh, enough already!" I slap at the crystalline water and then stand, sending it rippling in every direction.

I climb out of the pool and dry myself off, changing into some crude hand-made underwear and a netted piece. On my hunters, it would probably be their version of a tunic. To me, it fitted more like a dress coming to around my knees, loose and sheer, but I had been too far away from the constraints of my human society to worry about such things anymore.

With my long hair still damp and down my back, I head down the corridor, start towards the main upper deck. I step through and instantly find Sin'Chila facing towards me as if he'd almost sensed me coming. He bows, pressing in claws to heart in salutations. I smile and nod back to him. His gaze, bright and aware of everything, skims over my body and I shiver a little at how intensely they seem to linger over my pregnant shape. There is a hunger there, a possessiveness that makes my skin tingle in response.

Tearing my focus away from him, I find Memnis sitting at a nearby station, pressing at the controls. Sensing my attention, he rotates, flashing me a grimace-like grin in welcome. His jaws splay wide; a gesture that once had been terrifying to see, but which now only showed his pleasure at seeing me.

Yaknaur grunts, demanding my attention as well. I look at him finally and his brooding stare is all but molten. Although he's partly occupied with the task of removing parts in his wrist guard, there's no denying the stark heat glittering back at me.

All three of them sit there for a beat, staring at me. I can sense their need, almost as strongly as my own. My entire frame is vibrating with it and I'm surprised the three of them haven't attempted to rush at me with their usual eagerness. My legs tremble as I'm torn between leaving the area or practically throwing myself down at their feet for them to come to me. To touch me.

I suck in a breath and peer down instead at the floor, berating myself.

Yep, definitely my hormones. Get it together, Lottie.

Something shifts in the corner of my vision and a low rumbling growl follows soon after. I stiffen and slowly lift my head again to peer towards the cage. Darvik lingers there, crouched in one corner like a lion, lurking. Silent. His eyes fix on me, making me squirm under their intensity.

Forcing myself to move, I go and sit in my corner, where the hounds are lounging. I take a seat in my usual padded chair and allow the three of them to come curling around my legs. Taking it in turns the lizard-like creatures push and nudge at me, seeking my attention. I pet each one in turn, uttering gently praises as one would to a pet dog.

"Hey there, you," I say to the biggest one. Prowler, I call him. He is the largest of the three, with heavier spikes on his scaly sides and who always loves to go hunting the most.

The smaller one, 'Pup', licks at my knuckles in greeting and I give him an extra stroke on his sloping head.

And as for 'drooler' (well, that's self-explanatory). With distinctive red marks across his face, he laps at my feet, tickling me enough to jerk my leg up in surprise. Saliva slips between my toes and I cringe-part-laugh.

"Ugh, seriously? Did you have to do that?" I shake my head and wipe at my now soggy foot.

One of them brings me a smoothly rounded pebble and I take it, throwing it to the side for the others to chase and return to me. The common game of 'fetch' clearly didn't stop at just canines, even the Daku hounds seemed to enjoy playing it.

I smile as prowler retrieves it, dropping it at my feet to throw again. I lob it and it clangs against the metal flooring, the hounds' claws clatter in their mad rush to get to it before the others do.

I toss it again, and then again, watching them dash about in a frenzy of excitement. My next throw sends it further away than anticipated, but instead of going after it, two of them slump down to lay across the floor. Pup sits on his hide and just stares at me, having become bored with our game.

I roll my eyes. “Are we finished? Shall I get it this time?”

I speak to them as if expecting an answer. Pup cocks his head and then proceeds by lifting his back leg and scratching at his side.

“Fair enough,” I say, rising from my seat.

I head to where I’d thrown the pebble and kneel to reach for it. My bare knees touch the cool floor. I extend an arm out, the pebble is right there before me. I grab a nearby metal bar for stability and--

Wait. A metal bar?

I still, my hand on instinct clutching the steel in my grasp. A low growl sounds. Eerily close. Far too close for comfort. My heartbeat thunders within my ears as I slowly look down and almost swear aloud.

The red barrier across the floor… I’ve passed it. It’s directly behind me. I’m leaning against the cage, having mindlessly come too close. Panic surges and I lift my head, meeting a pair of searing eyes; white and yellow, two pits within sunken sockets. A large body is crouched low beside me, merely inches away from the other side of the cell, easily within reach.

Frozen like a rabbit, I suck in a breath and whisper his name, unable to help myself.

“Darvik.”

Darvik’s POV

At last, Darvik had waited so patiently for this moment. In time, he’d known that one of them would end up making the error of coming too close to his prison. Had anticipated it. However, what he had expected was it to be the female.

Foolish creature.

The *hooman* had been too busy playing with her beasts to realise her folly, and now it was too late. She was right there, so close and within his grasp. Blindly she had come to him. He hadn’t even needed to lure her in. One moment she had been at a distance, the next at his side.

A slow smile spreads across his mouth. His tusks there quiver with growing excitement.

Surprise and cunning wars within him as he breathes her in, scenting her sweetness. So small and fragile, like a pup to his own hulking size.

It would only be too easy, to simply reach through and grasp for her slender throat and snap it. None of them would have time to even blink, let alone rush to her rescue.

She makes a sound in distress, her eyes flashing to his. She realises her mistake swiftly. Her body stiffens and her pungeant fear laps at his senses, enticing and yet unpleasant.

Her terror is pure, so strong that he can hear the soft pounding of her heart beating like a war drum.

Her strange mouth moves, parting as though about to call out in fear for her males. Yet she does not. She is captured, wide-eyed, like prey to its hunter.

Instead of reaching for her, Darvik's gaze takes in her flowing blood-like mane. The locks sleek and soft looking, so unlike his own, transfixing him. It reminded him of the waters of a river, flowing, yet bright like the harvesting moons of his people.

Darvik stills, holding a breath. Poised.

Strangely slowly, he leans forward, claws spread out. He reaches for flesh, only to hover, eager to feel a silken lock. Her visible shudder rocks him and something heavy curls hard within his core.

Feigning nonchalance, he focuses on the tiny stone; her prize. Instead of taking it for his own, he nudges and sends it rolling forward. The rock stops against her slender pale leg. Unable to stop himself, he stares at the smooth skin there...

Memories surge, tormenting him. He had felt her warmth before. He had felt her small body against his breast, had carried her close, protecting her during those fleeting days in which she had been *his*.

The female moves, snapping him from his thoughts. *Lar-tree* takes the stone and grasps it to her chest like it is her most prized possession. Her large eyes have yet to leave him, as though expecting him to strike out.

If only she truly knew… he thinks to himself, o*f the danger she is in. Of how close she had come to losing her very life, had he had not spared her.* Had he have been any other outsider male, no such luck would have been on her side; that he knew.

Darvik had wanted to punish them all for their daring, for keeping him like this. A prisoner. Yet the fear coming from the *hooman* had dampened his resolve. Made him weak.

Trembling, she retreats, not once turning away or offering her back to him. Wary. Cautious.

Clever little female.

Although his moment is lost, Darvik huffs and turns away, giving her his back in dismissal.

Her light footsteps move away, but not before he hears her speak low and shaken words to him.

“Thank you.”

And with that she is gone; her warmth, her closeness, her terror. Leaving him strangely bereft in the process.

I am surprised. In fact, no, that’s putting it mildly. I am dumbfounded. As I walk back towards the hounds, I can’t stop myself from glancing back over my shoulder to the hunter in the cage. His massive back is all I can see, but I can see tension throughout its length.

Something had just passed between and I wasn’t entirely sure what it was. As soon I’d realised my mistake, I’d been certain that I was screwed, that Darvik would have grabbed me. He could have hurt me or used me as bait to get the others to set him free from his cage…

But he hadn’t.

Lowering, I sit back amongst my four-legged lizard companions. They nudge and lick at me in welcome, sending blasts of heat across my skin.

My heart is still pounding and I glance over towards my hunters who are oblivious to what had just occurred. My nape is slick with sweat even as I breathe out a sigh.

Absently, I stroke at Pup, scratching at his smooth head as I delve deeper in my thoughts, relieved and confused all at once.

Sin’Chila’s POV

Sin’Chila stands by a nearby station, casting his attention over the shield and radar controls when Memnis comes to a stop at his side. The tension ebbing from his kin’s being is like a heavy mist, unseen but felt. He checks the glowing maps before him one last time before sighing.

“What ails you, Memnis. Speak.”

The other male shifts at his side, troubled, before leaning in to speak in low tones.

“He hovers. Do you see how he watches her?”

Sin’Chila tilts his head but does not steer away from his task at the screens. With a pointed claw, he taps in a quick command.

“What of it,” he replies just as quietly.

Although choosing to feign disinterest, his shoulders tighten, his disquiet still lingering. He had witnessed their female crossing the boundary lines and moving closer to their prisoner. His alarm had surged, fear gripping him like a fist, only to then morph into confusion at the other male's reaction.

Nothing… He had done nothing to her. He had simply allowed her to walk away. Untouched. Unwounded.

How interesting.

How suspicious.

Yaknaur is nearby oblivious to their talking, unable to hear them, much to his relief. Had the giant known of their discussion, no doubt he’d have something to say on the matter. Distracted, he readjusts and tightens the strappings of his wrist guard, completely unaware of the scene playing out behind him. Had he have known, his fury would have been endless, his temper unequalled. As always.

“You saw,” Memnis says then to Sin’Chila with slow dawning realisation. “Didn’t you?” At his further silence, he adds. “This cannot continue.”

At his tone, Sin’Chila straightens, standing taller, rotating to face him. His sharp gaze roams over his kins expression, taking note of the quiet unease lurking there.

“Am I commander of this vessel? Or am I not?”

Memnis bows his head, a submissive motion of respect. “Of course. I only meant that--”

Reaching out, Sin’Chila places a hand against his shoulder, squeezing it in an attempt to offer reassurance. “Your worries are heard, my young brother, but you give me little credit. I may be the oldest but my senses are still as keen as ever.” He releases him and then juts his chin with meaning. “I see much more than you realise.”

Memnis offers a grimace, spreading his tusks wide. “Then what are we to do? I fear for our female's safety.”

“He will not harm her.” Sin'Chila states.

“How can you be so certain?”

A stillness settles over him, an eerie certainty that seems to grip at his very being; though where it came from, he did not understand.

“He wants her.”

It settles between them like a physical presence. Tangible. Memnis’ speaks the words in which they had all been thinking but dared not voice.

He wants her.

Sin’Chila looks back over his shoulder, his eyes falling to his mate who is curled up amongst their trusty hounds. Something within him softens, taking in her pale tiny frame with a certain knot of pride in his chest.

“Yes,” he says then, quietly. “Can you blame him?” Her light laughter catches as one of the hounds licks at her face, yipping and warbling with eagerness. “One would have to be blind and foolish to not find her fascinating.”

“She is *our* Chakria.”

Sin’Chila nods, in agreement. Contemplative. Memnis’ possessiveness echoes with that of his own. Insistent. Wanting to covet her greedily.

Their mate looks over at them and waves an arm in greeting, her alien *hooman* mouth broadens into a ‘smile’; a sign of her happiness.

Movement catches his attention and Sin’Chila glares then towards the cage and the large male lurking inside. Logic speaks to him, telling him to kill his adversary now and be done with it. To take his head and offer it to his female in a sign of strength for her approval.

But no. He snorts to himself, seething silently with distrust and turbulent thoughts.

That action alone would cause his mate pain; this he knew for certain. Her *hooman* ways and emotions were perplexing. She would no doubt plead with her clever words and soft eyes, as always, rendering him unable to deny her.

Even now, the hunter is watching her from the distance, his eyes giving him away. They glow for her, peering as though she is the most curious thing he has ever beheld. No violence. Only a quiet type of reverence, masked by his pride and calm, chilling with its familiarity. Much like a warrior of old.

...Much like himself.

Fate was testing them now. The challenge was set. Whatever happened from this moment forth would shape the foundations of their futures. They would have to tread carefully. Cleverly.

This male, whoever he was, would be watched most carefully. Judged. Measured at every instance.

Nodding to himself, Sin'Chila turns away from them, ignoring his brothers questioning brow. A certain sense of purpose grips him.

Yes. All would be well. He would make it so. For his clan. For his family. And for the little female whom he could not afford to lose.

He knew now what needed to be done.

Later in the night…

Again, I cannot sleep. The air is hot, probably caused by the three large males snuggled around me. I feel protected and also restless. I toss and turn, the crisp leaves and padding of our nest crunching within the stillness. It seems like hours in which I've just laid here, staring into the darkness. I can't switch off at all, all I can think of is Darvik.

He hadn't hurt me. He'd reached forward but hadn't attacked. Why is that? I can't help it. My mind keeps going over the incident time and time again, refusing to let it slide.

An array of emotions fly through me, swamping and twisting at my insides. He'd declared he hated us, possibly wanted us all dead. He'd had his chance, but hadn't taken it. Deep down it made me realise he wasn't as hateful as I had first considered. My empathy for him was growing; a thing I could not push aside.

Unable to calm my racing thoughts, I argue with myself inwardly.

He is not all bad. He's stubborn but maybe he can be reasoned with. Eventually.

*But then why come here if he meant no harm to any of u*s? Another voice rose. The Yautja had warned him to keep away, and yet still he'd followed us. *Why?*

Even now, Darvik refuses to back down. My hunters haven't either. They hadn't even so much as offered him a single scrap of food since he's been here. Nor had he slept. It was a wonder he still had any strength length to fight them at all.

I sigh, restless, knowing that sleep would not be coming to me any time soon. Memnis lays before me, deep in dreams, with his soft but deep breaths breezing across the top of my head. Yaknaur's heavy body spoons me from behind, his hand upon my hip. Sin'Chila is spread on his back near our feet, his face turned away, but the even movements of his chest tells me he is also sleeping.

I hold my breath, torn for a second more, before deciding to move. Carefully, I slide incrementally away from Yaknaur. I try to avoid touching Memnis too, fearing that even the

slightest contact might wake one of them up. Finally free, I rise to my feet, so so slowly. I step over one large leg and cringe when the leaves crunch under my bare feet.

I tiptoe forward and head for the doorway, pausing only once to look back and ensure that no one has noticed my absence.

No. They're all still. The three of them are oblivious.

Good. I nod to myself and slip through into the corridors. I edge towards one of the storage rooms, trying to be a quiet as possible. I quickly grab some strips of dried meat and shuffle back out and aim for the main deck. It wasn't much but it would have to do for now.

My pulse is thrumming, making me hyper-aware of everything, hyper-vigilant. As I move onto the deck, the built-in lighting flares into life at my movement, casting the steel walls and floors with a luminous glow.

A low snarl sounds and I spin to face the cage. My heart pounds harder as the being inside lurches from his feet, as though startled to see someone in the room with him. Mismatched eyes find mine across the space and then recognition swirls across Darvik's beastly scarred face. His mandibles flutter, his aggression simmering to a growling purr. Leaning forward, he clasps at the bars giving me a glimpse of his deadly blackened claws; claws that could render flesh and kill instantly.

Warning bells war within me as I clutch the food rations tighter to my chest. Uncertain. I shouldn't be doing this. I shouldn't be here right now, but it was too late to turn back now, I guess.

I lick at my lips, nervous, and then finally speak, breaking the deafening silence.

"Hello, Darvik."

Chapter 38

“Hello, Darvik.” My whisper echoes around the area and my belly lurches, afraid that someone, somewhere, would hear it.

I shouldn’t be here. The thought keeps repeating itself to me, over and over. I knew deep down, that if my hunters were to know I’d come to see him they be furious. I hesitate, urged on by another shard of intrigue. Unable to stop myself, I find myself taking a careful step forward towards the cell, gripped by a sense of determination.

“Why have you come?” His voice, deep and gravelly, jams straight into me like a spear, demanding my answer. It’s nothing like my males; it’s lower, wilder. Dangerous.

He’s not dangerous, an inner voice says then. And in a way, it spoke truthfully. Before, Darvik had only ever protected. He’d fought for me, provided food and even carried me in his arms, gently.

Where had that gentle giant gone to? I couldn’t help ponder.

Looking at him now, Darvik seems angry. His angular features are cast in shadows, ominous and edged in threat. His eyes are glowing, odd in colour, pinned on me with precision.

“I’ve brought you something to eat.” I shuffle on my feet awkwardly before leaning forward and carefully tossing the pouch of meat onto the floor close to the bars for him to reach. “I thought you might--”

“I do not want your food, *female*,” his sneer reverberates down my back. “I want nothing from you... From any of you.”

I smooth my features, trying not to show how awkward and unsure I feel. “You haven’t eaten for days, Darvik. You should take it.” I gesture to my gift, still sitting on the floor, untouched. “I promise it’s not poisoned.” I try a more light-hearted approach.

A low array of angry clicks comes from his direction. His shadow moves, taking a clearer shape as he steps nearer, revealing himself to me. The light finds his glowering face, dancing across his body which seems strained with tension.

“I’m not here to fight with you,” I add, calmly, fiddling with the folds of my faded top. “Put your pride aside for a moment. You need to eat. The others are sleeping…” I peer around anxiously as if expecting one of my Yautja to come stepping out from a corner somewhere. “No one is watching.”

I return my focus to Darvik, who cocks a hairless brow. “Except you.”

The words hover between us and I’m not entirely sure as to what meaning they have to him. Why would such a thing matter to him?

“Why are you always so stubborn?” I ask him suddenly, feeling braver now that he’s talking to me. “It’s starting to get on my nerves a bit.”

He hisses and snaps his head to the side in a gesture of dismissal, the thick ropey locks of his hair swaying with the motion. “I care not.”

I shrug. “Fine. Whatever you say, big guy.”

He whips back to face me, so sharply that I rear back a step. “You are foolish, *female*. Why did you come here? I am a danger to you and yours, yet here you are.” He snorts like an angry horse, splaying his mouth wide. “You should want me dead.”

It is my turn to lift a brow this time. “And are you? A *threat* to us, I mean.”

I want him to say it. He always skirts around the truth when it comes to his intentions. What is he hiding, exactly? He is neither admitting nor denying it. His silence is unsettling, as is his lack of response.

Daringly, I slide closer towards his domain, nearly at the red lines once again. I pause directly in front of them and stare at him dead in the face.

“You could have attacked me yesterday. You could have used me as a chance to escape. We both know it. So why didn’t you?”

He snaps his jaws at me again, pressing nearer to the bars as if to try and intimidate. Part of me wants to retreat, but instead I stand firm, refusing to cower.

“You are too easy a conquest, *hooman,”* he says with a slight sneer. “What sport would there be in it? What victory?”

A smile plays on my lips. “Ok then, suit yourself. Dodge my question.” I start to turn, intending to leave. If he wasn’t going to tell me anything, then fine. I absently point to the food again. “Take it. You’re going to need it…” I start to stride away from him, but not before muttering. “...to carry that massive ego of yours.”

A strong draft of wind hits me. It’s my only warning before something heavy and long snags around my middle, quick and fast as python. I gasp and look down to find Darvik’s tail is through the bars and now wrapped about my body. I stand there stunned for a heartbeat. Frozen. I barely have time to suck in a breath when it pulls me backwards. My legs stagger and I spin around at the last second to brace against the cage. My arms come, gripping the steel bars, my body flush against them. Darvik’s face leans forward. I can feel him now; his body heat. He’s standing so close, towering down inches away from me.

“Do not mock me,” he growls, even though it sounds more like a trilling purr. There is a playful edge to his voice; a realisation that allows me to relax a little in his hold. “I could end your life here and now, and there would be no one to defend you. Do not doubt my strength, *Taz’arin*, I could--”

“You won’t hurt me,” I whisper it before I can stop myself. It’s almost as if I’ve been possessed and someone has spoken the words for me.

He so close that my vision is swimming a little, but I do not miss the way his gaze softens, even just the slightest.

He tilts his head and I wait for the snark reply. When none comes, we simply stand that way for a beat, staring at each other, neither of us moving. He doesn’t let me go, nor do I struggle to be free.

I take this chance to look him over again, taking him in. His scarred face is mangled to the point of looking hideous at first glance. But there is something about the way his expressions switches between fierceness and then open curiosity that has me transfixed. His grip on me isn’t painful, although he’s not giving me much room to be able to move away from him. As if sensing my very thoughts, his tail winds tighter. A coiling warmth. A blanket of heat around my waist. Absently, one of my hands lands on it, sliding against its scaly texture and I see Darvik shudder visibly, not once taking his gaze from mine.

What am I doing? The thought hits me. *I shouldn’t be here,* I repeat to myself. I should be fighting to get away from him, calling for my mates. But I’m not. And my own actions are confusing to me. I feel oddly *safe* with Darvik and yet… ashamed of myself. I--

“*Chakria.”*

Every bone and muscle in my body stiffens, alert at the familiar trill coming from behind me. I turn my head and find three figures there standing within the doorway. Sin’Chila, Yaknaur and Memnis. As if someone has just thrown a rock at me, I flinch, already sensing their displeasure. I first look to Memnis, who had spoken first. He looks almost sad, like a puppy being rejected by its owner. Yaknaur on the other hand is panting hard, his chest puffed out with clear anger, claws fisted tight. His eyes are ablaze. Sin’Chila on the other hand – I looked to him finally – is all eerie calmness. His inhuman face tells me nothing of what is going through his mind right now. Yet his gaze is sharp, as piercing as any blade.

I try to squirm free of Darvik’s hold and when he doesn’t let go, I hear Yaknaur give an aggressive snarl.

“Darvik,” I whip back to him, pleading with him with a frantic whisper. “Please, let go of me.”

Darvik - still hovering dangerously close - tilts his head.

“You fear them?”

I *tsk* and roll my eyes. “No, of course not.” I shiver a little as I recognise my own words as a lie. “I am only afraid of what they will think.” Of what they’ll do… *to him*.

He utters a low purr, his jaws rippling into a slight grin, but he doesn’t speak.

I tug backwards again in an attempt for freedom.

Exasperated, I speak again, “I am their female and they will not like that you are touching me. If you have any sense at all, you’ll--”

Before I can even finish my sentence he releases me with a grunt. His tail slips away leaving me feeling cold. Startled, I blink at him.

“*Their* female…” He echoes, seemingly to himself, with some note of disgust. His gaze drops to my belly and I edge away, placing my hand there in an unconscious gesture of protectiveness.

Before I can retort, heavy footsteps approach slowly from behind. Heat swarms near my back.

“You were attempting to release him?” It is Yaknaur who speaks now and with a heavy bite of accusation.

I spin to look up at him, my neck craning with effort. He’s towering over me, all muscle and alien, but I know it’s not me that his ire is truly aimed at.

“I was giving him some food,” I correct him, jutting my chin in a pre-emptive gesture to the chastisement I know would soon come.

Yaknaur scowls down at me. “You—”

“Leave her be.”

Darvik’s voice cuts through the air and we all turn to him in surprise. My males frown deeply and I join them in their confusion.

Darvik straightens then, standing to his full intimidating height, much taller than the other three.

“She is not to be punished.”

My mouth parts slightly. Wait, what? Is he… worried for me?

Sin’Chila reaches for me then, drawing me firmly but protectively into his massive chest. He smells of soil, of trees and wilderness. Pleasant. His hand presses across my back; his strength contained and careful every time that he touches me.

“We have no intention of doing any such thing. She is our most precious life, our beloved mate.” He leans down to breathe in the scent of my hair, almost bending double to reach my shorter height. His attention however is fixed on Darvik, unblinking and shrewd with inner cunning. “But as for you...”

Darviks grunts, glaring back at Sin’Chila. There’s a silent battle passing between them, unseen and unheard, but as obvious and as thick as the humidity around us.

“You are like a headstrong beast,” Sin’Chila adds with calm mockery. “Even now, prideful until the very end.” The hint of amusement in his tone fades, leaving only cold intent

remaining. “Yet again, you have dared to touch that which does not belong to you. You must be eager for death indeed to repeat such a mistake.”

Darvik doesn’t so much as blink, unmoved by the possible danger he’s now facing. “If you intend to take my life, do it now and spare me of your feeble words and insults. You are starting to bore me.”

The air thickens and I place a hand against my mate's chest.

“Sin’Chila…” I say his name again, my worry obvious.

Luckily for me, he ignores the others males goading and continues to rub into the top of my head, purring lightly. He presses me closer, all but plastering our bodies together until I’m almost standing on the tips of my toes.

“Well?” Darvik tries again, daring Sin’Chila to act, even as his mismatched eyes fall to me. Darkening. “Here I am. What are you waiting for? Do it!”

My heart pounds as Sin’Chila leans in to murmur lowly, “What say you, my female? What shall we do with him? What is your wish?”

I lean back and look up at him, searching his face. His gaze probes me, searching for something in my expression. I shake my head; there is no point in answering. He knows what I’d say and ask for. I knew this look of his and had seen it many times before. He was testing me, giving me the choice for our prisoner; life or death. A test of will and loyalty. Had a female of their own kind been in my position right now, they would have chosen annihilation. Perhaps even completed the deed of ending his life herself. But no, not me. I couldn’t do it. I wouldn’t.

I blink, my vision swimming with sudden unwanted tears.

The knowing gleam I see reflecting back from him is unsettling and a chill slips down my spine. As I shiver, Sin’Chila hugs me closer, his body heat burning against me.

As if sensing my emotions, he lifts a massive hand and slides his claws through my hair, cupping the side of my head.

“Be easy,” he coos, nuzzling down into me again. “It is not you that I am displeased with. Know this.”

I nod, somewhat relieved.

“You are precious to us beyond all else. And it is for that reason that I must do this…”

The snake of dread worms its way through my gut again and I sense, rather than see, Memnis and Yaknaur press in closer from either side of us.

“Realise that what I do next is necessary. There is no other way.” Sin’Chila’s arms grip me tighter as he murmurs into my ear. “...he must learn.”

Learn? Learn what? His ominous words slam into me and I rear back, anxious.

I have no time to react or even speak. Strong arms sweep me up and I'm carried a few steps, plonked lightly down upon a nearby crate.

"What are you---?"

As one, they crowd around me, all towering muscle and strength. Slick male flesh cocoons around me, hot and heavy. Multiple clawed hands fall upon all at once. Roaming. Seeking.

Snapping from my shock, I snap my focus to Sin'Chila again; the centre focus of my trio. Now seated upon the crate, he guides my thighs open, stepping to place himself between them. His expression is chaos. Predatory and yet dangerously calm. Fixed upon my face.

"To whom do you belong to, little *hooman*?"

Chapter 39

“To whom do you belong to, little *hooman*?”

Something in me stirs, awakening, becoming very aware of the heavy trio of bodies now surrounding me. Their scents swirl around me. Male. Musky. I squirm upon my makeshift seat, my own body responding to their nearness and the aggressive burning of their eyes staring down at me.

“I—” My words cut off as Memnis places a firm but gentle hand on my chest, pressing me back to lay upon the wooden box. I do as bade and the ceiling meets my gaze for a beat and then suddenly they are there too, the three of them filling my vision, standing around me like hungry lions around a tasty meal they planned to devour.

“W-what are you doing?” My skin prickles and I’m nervous, but for so many different reasons.

When I attempt to sit back up, Memnis keeps me down. His head lowers as he brushes the side of his roughened alien face against mine, purring soothingly.

“Answer the question, *mate.”* I hear Sin’Chila repeat with some bite. “To whom do you belong to?”

It takes a while for me to respond. After all, how can I focus when multiple sets of hands start to paw at my limbs? Claws scrape my flesh, petting and seeking every inch of me. An attack of sensation. My nipples peak beneath my clothing and someone’s thumbs cruises across each tip until I can barely think straight.

I don’t know who is who and doing what. All I know is that I’ve been wanting this, wanting them; for too long, it seems. My mind scrambles for logic even as the rest of me rejoices and cries for more of them.

I arch and moan aloud, the sound verging on a whimper. “You.” I rasp and lick at my lips. “Oh… I-I belong to *you*.”

A chorus of pleased hisses sound, causing me to shiver.

A set of claws settle onto my sloping belly possessively. I fight through the haze and focus on Sin’Chila, who stares down at me with a rawness that steals my breath away.

“And this?” He bends closer, hovering right before my face. His ropey hair dangles down, trailing against my chest and shoulders. Tickling. “Who’s young do you carry, *female*?” There’s a darkened note to his question. Demanding. Refusing to be denied.

I whine again. “Stop it, guys. You already know whose it is.”

“I want to hear you say it,” Sin’Chila grinds out, placing his other hand by my head, caging me to the crate. “Speak the words, *Chakria*. *You must*.”

“Yours. It’s yours!” My voice crumbles as Yaknaur glides his way up my thigh, tugging up my shirt and pausing at the V of my groin.

All three of them trill in agreement, their pleasure evident.

“Pathetic, weakling dogs.” Another voice comes from behind them and I’m reminded once again that we are not alone. Darvik is watching nearby, although I cannot see him due to the barricade muscled forms standing around me.

Yaknaur spins away, spitting out a snarl to the outsider. “You!” He takes one step away and towards the cage with menace. “You will be silent or I will--”

“Enough, Yaknaur,” Sin’Chila chides, reaching out to tug his brother back to our side.

Yaknaur’s chest puffs out in annoyance, eager for a fight, but one meaningful look from his older sibling seems to calm him almost instantly.

“Your ire is not needed here,” Sin’Chila adds with an edge of cunning. “There are many ways to tame a wild *rog.* You know this.”

“Indeed. By your will then, my brother. It shall be done.” Yaknaur eventually nods and spins back to me, a wildness in his gaze that has my heart leaping in its beat.

I don’t know what’s happening at this point. I feel something is amiss between my trio of warriors. The way that they share secretive glances and the odd nod of silent agreement between them is making me feel out of place and uneasy, even though my belly is curling with eagerness for whatever they had planned.

Sin’Chila catches my gaze and tilts his head.

“She is intriguing, is she not?” Although his focus is on me, it’s not me he’s speaking to, but Darvik.

He trails a claw down my cheek, creating goosebumps down my arms. Remarkably gentle.

“She came to us as prey. Our captive,” he explains aloud, earning a low huff from our observer. “And now she is a treasure beyond compare.”

His next words slam into me, shocking me to stillness.

“She appeals to you too. No?”

Wait. What?

My mouth parts, confused and taken aback. I hear Darvik snap his jaws in anger but he doesn’t speak. He doesn’t throw out any insults. Nor does he deny the accusation.

I don't have much chance to ponder anything further as large hands continue their attack with an even more ravenous intensity. Mandibles nip at my neck and shoulders. Roughened paws seek every inch of my body, tugging at my clothes, spreading my thighs. Eager. Hungry.

"Oh god…"

I'm growing wetter by the minute and no doubt they could all scent it on the air, my arousal broadcasted to every single male in this room. Someone gropes my aching breasts again, another grasps my hips as they roll, my need growing with every passing second.

"Sin'Chila," I whisper his name. A plea.

"Easy, *my female*." He's suddenly there again, breathing against my face. "Surrender to us."

"Please." I feel so aroused right now. Aroused and confused. I want nothing more than to just let them do what they want with me. I'm ready. I'm practically shaking with need for them. But knowing that Darvik was still here and watching--

My top is suddenly tugged right up, exposing my small breasts to the open air. I gasp as my nipples peak. Yaknaur greedily finds one, twisting at one tip whilst purring lowly. It takes me a moment to register that the three of them are completely naked now. Their loincloths are somehow gone and their cocks bounce against their taut abdomens, swollen and purple-tipped, seeping ribbons of seed with their excitement.

Sin'Chila pulls down my panties, tearing them from my legs in his haste to have access to the most vulnerable part of me. His brothers grab for my legs, splaying them open as he slides himself between them, grinding his hot cock against my bared pussy.

"Feel us, *Chakria*," he trills, rubbing himself against my slit, stroking my clit with each slow slide between my folds. "Know us. There is no shame now… Only the truth."

The truth. I nod, drowning in sensation as he notches himself against me, slowly breaching into my tight entrance.

The truth was this; I didn't care who was watching us right now. I wanted my men. I needed them and they needed me too. Nothing could stop them from taking me. And likewise, nothing, not even a simple human emotion such as embarrassment, could prevent me from accepting the pleasure they would reap upon me. I was ready for it. I would accept it all and more besides.

I was their mate. Their female. Always.

As if sensing my train of thought, Sin'Chila nods back at me, gradually sliding his swollen shaft into my cunt. I look down, unable to help myself, panting like crazy as I observe his throbbing flesh being fed into my human body.

The noise that leaves my throat is all animal. Helpless but satisfied.

"Hurry, brother," Yaknaur hums heatedly. He's gripping his dick now, jerking at it hard. "I want her next. I want to feel her warm little *snat* around me. I cannot wait." His glowing eyes

shutter for a moment, his head tossing back as if already imagining the feel of me. “She smells so good.”

Sin’Chila rides into me, slow and torturous, drawing out again, only to plunge back in, stretching me to the fullest. My insides grip at him greedily and I writhe and mewl for more.

Blinded by lust, I claw at his massive ashen-coloured shoulders and chest. A wild thing.

“My, my, you are greedy.” Sin’Chila hisses, surging harder into me in response. “Have patience.”

He gives a signal and nods. Memnis reaches for my wrists, pulling them down and pinning them to the wood on either side of my head.

I strain, fighting to be free. “No!” I gasp, shaking my head. “Please, let me touch you.”

They all flash me a splitting grin, each one filled with smug male satisfaction.

“Submit,” Memnis purrs against the side of my hair. He refuses to let me loose, even as Yaknaur dips his free hand down to stroke at my clit.

“Oh fuck!”

Yaknaur is awkward, his movements jagged, but each rub of his calloused fingers makes my nub swell and my inner walls clench around the cock inside me. He skims further down, feeling that place where our genitals are joined together. When Sin’Chila draws out, Yaknaur grips the base of his shaft, earning him a rumbling growl. Without shame, he pumps his brother’s length a few times, skimming my folds lightly. Once released again, Sin’Chila all but ploughs his way back into me, harder and thicker than before.

Holy mother of...

I’m getting close. My climax is climbing, fast and demanding. I’m going to cum so hard, I can already sense its power humming through me like the rolling thunder before a storm.

“Oh, please!” I thrash and cry for them. “I want to touch you. I want to cum. Please, make me cum! Have mercy!”

“*Nej,”* Sin’Chila replies hoarsely, appearing more beast-like than ever before, straining over me. “Never. You are *mine*. *Mine* to take. *Mine* to breed.” He’s barely keeping it together. I can see it. He’s on the brink too, in that place between control and sheer madness.

Tears fill my vision. I’ve become so lost in a void of raw sensation. I can’t focus or think. I can scarcely breathe. I’m almost there. My orgasm is close. I need it more than anything. So much so that I’d give my very soul for it.

“Look at me.”

I can do little else. Instantly, I find Sin’Chila’s gaze with my own. His eyes are like a furnace, scorching. His jaws snap, determination settling across his mottled brow.

He gives me no warning as he slides in deep one more time and simply sits there, notched against the neck of my cervix. My mouth falls open. I can feel his cock jerking, his cum flooding my insides with heat, bathing my walls. He does not roar or shout his victory. He simply says one word...

"*Mine.*"

My eyes roll and my body begins to shudder with its own release. A long groan rolls through my throat as my womb cramps and ripples with my orgasm.

All the while, Sin'Chila simply stares down at me, fiercely harsh, with a certain edge of tenderness. "Take it, *my mate.* Take all of that which I am."

I writhe some more, still riding out the last of my pleasure. Sin'Chila bends low, rubbing his scaly broad cheek against mine with affection.

"My strength, my spirit, and all that I am and yet to be, is *yours*."

I collapse against the crate, worn out and panting hard. Tears slip down my face for reasons unbeknownst to me. I'm overwhelmed with emotion, with the love I have for this male. I am rocked by it. I've never felt so wanted or so complete in my entire life.

I love him.

Trapped in a daze, Sin'Chila pulls himself out of me and my head lolls wearily as I try to regather myself. He turns to speak to someone.

Darvik.

"Now do you see?"

I can't bring myself to look at any of them, I am far too drained and my cheeks are burning from sudden mortification. Thickened digits delve between my folds and in the corner of my vision I see Sin'Chila hold out his glistening fingers for the other male to see.

There is no response, not even a threatening snarl. The sheer silence around us deafening. Deadly. A physical ghostly touch across my naked skin.

"*Chakria*."

The ceiling whirls as Yaknaur suddenly grabs for my ankle and drags me close to him. I try to whimper but my mouth feels as dry as sand. He doesn't wait. Without warning, he seats himself at my sex and slides himself fully home. My body arches at his invasion, but it also welcomes him, stretching perfectly to accommodate as if it was built simply for his shape and size.

I blink and he's there, bowing over me like the massive beast that he is. All bulging muscle, he presses close, putting us chest to chest, pinning me down with some of his weight.

My nipples peak at his closeness and I wriggle some more, secretly knowing that he loves doing this. He loves being close when we're fucking. Flesh to flesh.

"Our brother has filled you well, little one," he croons. "And yet you are still so very tight."

He's big, but I take him greedily. I suck in harsh breaths as he starts to ride into me, in and out, his slim hips and muscled thighs bracing with power. I moan in delight as my pussy spasms, already eager for another round.

Yaknuar's arms come around me, his plate-sized paws sneaking under my ass to grip me closer to him. His steady thrusts pick up pace, forming into a relentless pounding. My tits jiggle and the crate beneath me creaks as though ready to collapse at any moment. I whine whilst he grunts, and the noises echo, sounding like music to my ears.

He grins then, dark and filled with mischief. He shifts, stroking himself into me at different angles as if seeking something.

I whimper. "Oh, please."

"Where is it, *female?"* He trills. "Come now. Do not fight me. Let me have it."

His big cock hits something inside of me and my toes curl with the onslaught of fire-hot lightning that spears through my entire womb.

I emit a shriek.

"Ah, there it is," he gloats, growling, fucking me harder. "*There it is*."

"Oh!"

"You like this?"

"Oh, yes! Please, yes! Don't stop!"

I'm done for. Screw my pride and dignity, I can't help myself anymore.

He's so god damned huge and I feel so tiny trapped beneath him. His ass plunges forward, his cock splitting me wider, cruising against that sweet spot that is driving me insane.

There nothing gentle in the way he's taking me. It's purely wild. A primitive joining of flesh as old as time itself.

And it feels so good.

Yaknaur's next thrust practically moves me. I bow across the crate and my head falls back over its edge. Blood rushes to my brain as everything spins and the side of my brow brushes against a powerful thigh. Trilling, Memnis' strokes at my chest and belly, soothing, crooning gentle noises. His cock is rigid, standing proud and directly beside my face.

It's filthy. It's wrong. I shouldn't do it, but I do. I want to taste him. Without thinking, I strain and reach for him… with my mouth. I latch onto his seeping purpled tip and suckle on him, hard. Hungrily.

"Grekt!"

He rears back a mere inch, only to then surge forward, riding into my mouth with one smooth thrust.

"*Lar-tee*…" He says something else in his mother tongue, but he utters it so weakly that my translator doesn't manage to convert it.

And like that, they continue to use me. Memnis fills my mouth, making my eyes water and my cheeks bulge as his size finds the back of my tender throat. I fight back against my gag reflex and his brother utters a growl, clearly excited by our display, picking up his pace between my thighs.

I choke and my pussy quivers, another climax rushing at me like a tsunami. I can barely breathe but I don't care. All I can taste, feel and smell is them. I am consumed by them.

Memnis crouches lower, straddling my face, trying to angle himself deeper down my throat. I try to relax and open up for him, eager to please.

"*Lar-tee, y*es. Take it." Memnis whines, his tone almost begging. "My seed is yours. I offer it to you. *Only* you."

He tweaks at my nipples and I struggle to moan around his flesh. Yaknaur leans over and his mandibles close around my slender neck, clamping possessively.

Voices bombard me from all angles, egging me on.

"Swallow him down."

"Great spirits, look at her…"

"She is ready. I can feel her tightening…"

"Go deeper, brother. You know how much she likes it when you do that."

Another joins them in a distant low growl. "Give her to me."

In tandem, they saw in and out of my body and their alternating grunts of lust pretty much send me over the edge.

"Let me have her!"

Low chuckles echo and as one they both surge into me and stiffen. My orgasm rips through me, ground shaking with its intensity. I give a muffled squeal as hot cum pours down my oesophagus. More floods my sex and a sense of utter completion rolls through me.

“Our little female.”

“Our mate.”

“*Chakria.*”

They purr and trill, stroking at my arms and belly soothingly as I finally come down from my euphoric high.

Memnis pulls himself from my lips at the exact same time Yaknaur slips from between my thighs. I feel drunk and weak, drugged by the sheer rawness of their loving. I feel used and sore but nothing stops the small smile that spreads across my face.

Damn… these guys were going to be the death of me. I’d never known anything like this before; this sense of bliss. I loved it. And I loved them.

Strong arms lift me, breaking me from my thoughts. Sin’Chila offers a chuckle as I slump into his chest, carried like a child. I wrap my arm around his neck, still out of it. He doesn’t speak to me but instead carries me towards the cage where Darvik is.

Weakly, I lift my head from the crook of Sin’Chila’s neck. I follow their gazes towards the hulking male on the other side of the bars. And then gasp…

There he is, kneeling upon the ground like a fallen warrior. Darvik’s gaze is thunderous and feral, his two-coloured eyes glowing within the dimness of his prison. Breathing hard, his focus roams over each male before him in turn, murderous. Downright terrifying. I’ve never seen him look so angry before. His attention then slides to me and something else takes its place.

Vulnerability.

His muscular body shudders, gleaming with sweat. Despite having just been thoroughly loved, I can’t help but admire his form. He’s big, almost expanding before my very eyes. His cloth is gone – I realise belatedly – and I can’t stop myself from looking down at his groin. The length of his cock bobs, dribbling with thick creamy semen. It looks swollen, almost painfully so; a deep purple-red. The head is bulbous and chunky; a feature that for some reason makes me shiver. Like the others, silvery veins weave around its thickness, throbbing with a strange glow…

“Do not look at me.” He snaps, more out of frustration, it seems.

He grips the bars, nearly bend them.

I snap my gaze away, ashamed of myself.

“I-I’m sorry,” I whisper, my cheeks burning. What else could I possibly say to him at this point?

Torn, I wait for his fury to rip forth, sensing it coming. After that *display*, I knew he must truly hate us now, including me. He wasn’t someone of importance; I barely even knew him.

So then why did I feel a horrible dread at the thought of him rejecting or hating me?

He bows forward, slowly, one arm coming through the bars. I press into Sin'Chila, expecting an attack. He reaches, and instead of slashing out, his fingers slide across the arch of my barefoot. He skims my toes, so delicately light that my entire length shudders.

"*Female*." He looks so torn, his scarred monstrous face eerily human. Hateful and lost. Furious yet... yearning.

Darvik slides further up my calf, using the back of his hand as though being careful so as not to scrape or catch my skin with his claws. So, so gentle.

At my gasp, Sin'Chila finally moves and retreats a single step, pulling me away.

Darvik slams forward against the bars and roars, the sound rattling my eardrums.

"Curse you!"

Sin'Chila merely chuckles at him, as does Yaknaur. Memnis, however, stands there, watching quietly.

"Damn you all!"

Without saying anything, Sin'Chila hefts me higher into him and turns, taking me with him. His brothers follow at the rear behind us.

"*Drakt ni pro'vict osk. Ni drakt vo.*"

I have no idea what Darvik's saying, his tone is so quiet that I barely hear him, but my males do. They all stiffen, faltering in their steps. Low growls of warning sound and Yaknaur spins with a snarl, about to stride back towards their prisoner, probably to slaughter him.

Sin'Chila slams his opposite shoulder into Yaknaur's, stopping him in his tracks, blocking his path.

"*Nej*, brother. Not today."

Yaknaur's chest flares, his fleshy mouth flaring in aggression. "But he said--"

"Ignore it. His pride is wounded. Let him sit with it. The more he fights this, the harder it will be."

I frown but ask nothing. What did Sin'Chila mean by that? What an odd thing to say. I have so many questions but knew it was the wrong time and place to be asking them now. Sin'Chila's face is a mask, fixed with determination. I have no energy to test or fight with any of them right now.

As if reading my very thoughts, he holds me tighter and purrs, rubbing into the side of my hair.

“He must learn.” That is all he says to me, repeating the same words he’d spoken earlier.

Learn what? And why? He clearly had something in mind for the other hunter and I wasn’t entirely sure if I wanted to know what that plan was. Each day, I was beginning to understand my hunters' intentions less and less. It was frustrating, to say the least. I could only hope that whatever it was, it would not result in bloodshed for either party. Or worse.

The trio shares a look, communicating silently between them. Some kind of hidden agreement is made and without further ado, they carry me from the room and the lone male still knelt, seething quietly in the cage.

Chapter 40

Ugh, will he ever stop staring at me? I think as I look up and find Darvik watching us again. His eyes are heavy on me, like a blanket, smothering with its intensity. Come to think of it, does the guy ever blink? Seriously. His two-coloured eyes meet mine and something in me stirs, my cheeks warming; although I'm not sure if it is because of him or the fact that I'm feeling a little under the weather today. Could humans still get the flu on other alien planets? I hoped not. Damn, where was google when you needed it?

I shift in my chair and nausea hits me for the umpteenth time today. I try and think of what offensive food I might have eaten this morning, only to recall I hadn't touched a single morsel of the breakfast they'd offered me. In fact, I'd hardly drank anything either; my stomach churns just thinking about it.

By mistake, I glance up again and Darvik is there, as always, staring. Hard. I lean into Yaknaur's body, who is sat in the seat beside me, using his huge person as a shield. Anything to break that thread of awareness between me and the male in the cage nearby.

I can't deal with him. Not today.

I sigh. Yaknaur is talking to me, his tusk clacking as he points to shimmering screens in front of him. Most of the morning he'd spent showing me how to control and operate the ships. There were so many internal and external maps to read, including codes to remember, access points and even how to set the vessel into auto-flight mode. Any other time I would have hungered to learn from him, yet for some reason, my brain wasn't cooperating with me. Snippets of information were going into one ear and out of the other. I couldn't focus. I felt agitated and tired.

Hormones? Maybe?

I shrug, uncertain, becoming even more fed up with each minute that passes by. My only comfort comes from Yaknaur's nearness. Although he's unaware of my disquiet, his presence is soothing, his voice low like a lullaby to my ears. His natural musky scent surrounds me, seeping through me like a balm.

Absently, my lethargic mind wonders, slipping into dangerous territory as I recalled what had happened a few days ago. Of when the others had claimed me, right here in this room. Right in front of Darvik…

I shiver, both in a mixture of shame and, dare I say it… excitement.

Seriously? What the hell is wrong with you? I ask myself.

I couldn't deny it. There was no point. Things were changing between everyone on the ship again, slowly but surely. My hunters were as protective as ever, if not, more so. Darvik, on the other hand – despite the others constant tormenting –has seemed to have slipped into this

eerie state of calm restraint. He no longer retaliated with anger at my males. Instead, an edge of surety clung to him. Confident even. Which was starting to make me feel nervous.

I chew on my lip as temptation nudges at me. Drawn, I peer around Yaknaur's large shoulders towards the cage to see what Darvik is doing now. I blink, taken aback to find he'd already moved so stealthily to the opposite end of his prison. Hulking in the gloom, his gleaming eyes are on me again. White and yellow. His view is no longer blocked.

I swallow and my skin prickles. Damn it. Everywhere I go he just doesn't stop with the eye-stalking. Can he not take a hint? What's with him?

A shudder rolls through me again, only this time I know it's got nothing to do with the other hunter. The room sways and a sharp twinge flares within my midriff out of nowhere. I gasp at the pain and reach out in panic, grabbing for Yaknaur's muscular thigh.

He pauses, mid-speech, and looks down with a dip of his mottled brow. "Chakria?"

Taking in my expression, he spins in his seat with obvious concern.

I stare down at the floor, trying to gather myself as the world continues to dance when it shouldn't.

A clawed hand appears in front of me. It tilts my chin up and Yaknaur searches my face closely.

"You are pale. Are you unwell?"

I shake my head and he lowers his hand. He reaches for a pouch nearby and pulls out some dried meat from within, holding it out between his claw-tipped fingers in offering. "Here. Take it. Do you thirst?"

I grimace, refusing to take it. "No, thanks. It's fine. I'm not hungry anyway."

Maybe it's a stomach bug? I mean, morning sickness is a thing for human women, right? I reason it out, uncertain as to why this was happening.

I stroke at my belly as more heat spears there. My attention falls to the cage again and a growl can be heard from inside. My heart does a little leap, a tiny thread of thrill surging unexpectedly from nowhere as it reminds me of something...

Give her to me. Let me have her!

I can still hear Darvik's inhuman voice uttering the command. A haunting memory.

Yaknaur places an arm about my shoulders, mistaking my shiver as a sign that I'm cold. He draws me to his chest and the heat of him reminds me of stepping into a nice warm bath.

He leans down and sniffs at me through his splaying mouth, drawing in a hiss. "Tell me of what ails you."

My insides melt at how worried he sounds.

I pinch at the bridge of my nose. “I dunno,” I answer honestly. “Maybe I’m just tired.”

I lean into Yaknaur’s chest, stroking the dark leathery skin there. He’s all muscle and hardness as he trills and nuzzles into the top of my hair.

“Perhaps you should rest,” he then adds. “The others will be gone for some time. They have yet to patrol the eastern section of the *Vilan.”* He then gestures to the row of seating behind us. “You may sleep for as long as you wish. I will keep watch.”

I consider the idea, longing to stay with him, but then Darvik shifts within the corner of my vision, reminding me of his presence, and the idea suddenly doesn’t appeal to me anymore. I want some space. To breathe. To think. Being in the same room as him is doing weird things to my head.

“I think I might go lay down in our nest,” I say and rise carefully.

Yaknaur nods and starts to reach for me. “I shall carry you...”

“No.” I nudge, encouraging him to remain seated. I offer him a reassuring smile. “It’s fine. You stay here. I know that Sin’Chila won’t be happy if you leave the deck unmanned for too long. I can take myself.”

Yaknaur stills and then bows his head. His charcoal dreads sway at the motion. “By your will, my *Chakria*. If that is what you wish.”

I stroke his cheek and am rewarded with a humming purr. For such a big brute he could really be a big teddy bear at times.

“I won’t be long.” I offer him another smile before walking away from him. My feet at one point nearly trip over themselves as another lurch rips through my lower torso, stealing my breath.

I gasp.

“*Female.*”

I hear Darvik call to me, his voice rumbling, reminding me of a lion. I dare not look to the side, yet I sense him shifting closer as I pass by his cage. He says something else to me but my ears are ringing at this point. I need to lay down.

And with that, I head out of the door and away from them both.

Darvik’s POV

There is something wrong with the female. Darvik can sense it. His senses miss nothing. Inhaling, he gathers her scent, puzzled. She does not smell of that which is sickened or wounded, but it is clear something is amiss with her. She had clung to her mate's side, burrowing to seek comfort. Their eyes had met many times and repeatedly she had tried to hide from him; the expressions across her alien face turbulent with some inner turmoil he could not fathom. He sensed no fear from her, though she made much effort to avoid him.

So then, what was it?

Leaning against the bars, he considers it further, lost in thought. The other two of her trio were gone, leaving only this useless beast left to guard her.

As she had left, it had taken every ounce of his willpower not to reach for her. Cage or not, the need to be close to her beat at him like a drum. Wherever she went, he wanted to follow, and whenever she left his line of sight, his annoyance made itself known.

Give her to me.

His body ripples at the surging memory. Had he truly said such things? His weakness had been great. But instead, where hatred had once dwelt, only a firm resolve remained now. A change was upon him, shaking at every belief he had thought he had known. There was only a pull now, insistent and hungry.

He could remember everything; the *hooman's* cries and whimpers as her males had claimed her, one by one. Her eyes haunted him still, dark like the reflections of a pool. Deep and endless.

Their rutting had nearly destroyed him. Sheer envy had strangled at nearly all of his pride. Pure torture.

He wanted her. He wanted the female for his own. He lusted for her softness. Her sleek smooth limbs. The flaming red of her mane. He craved to covet her. To protect. To provide. Even though he knew only too well that she belonged to another.

Grekt. He huffs, casting the enemy warrior nearby a scowl. His tail swishes across the ground, restless. These males of hers were skilled and cunning, so he would have to tread carefully. They meant to break him, to make him kneel.

Nej. Never. His claws clench into fists. *It would never happen.*

For now, the female was his focus. Patience would be his greatest ally now; a test of his will. It was too late to turn back now. He had made his intentions clear to all of them.

The words he had spoken to the other hunters echoed through his mind, ringing more truer than ever before, sealing his fate.

Drakt ni pro'vict osk. Ni drakt vo.

“*I will take your female. She will be mine”*

I’m awake. Unfortunately. One moment my body is on fire and the next I’m wracked with cold shivers as though overcome by a fever. I had hoped a few hours of napping would have helped me feel better. Only it hadn’t. I felt worse. Much, much worse.

I lurch upright as another attack of pain comes. I suck in a breath and double over, hugging my stomach in panic.

What the…

Why is this happening? There was no way I was due to give birth yet. I was far too early in my pregnancy to be having any contractions. It made no sense. I rub at my bump, hoping to quell the tightness there. Vomit shoot up the back of my throat without warning and I turn my head in time to spit it out across leaves beside me.

“Ugh..” I groan, wiping at my lips after. “Gross.”

The room around me is empty. No one is here, only me. Another wave of discomfort comes and it's enough to make me stagger to my feet. My body hunches, fighting me.

“Memnis!” I try and call for them. For anyone. “Sin’Chila?!”

My voice echoes back. Nobody comes and nobody answers.

I stagger towards the door; an action in itself that feels like I’m trying to climb a mountain. More sweat glides down my back. Once I reach the exit, I lean against the frame to catch my breath.

I need to get to the deck and find the others. With that plan in mind, I head out into the corridor. At one point my knees start to knock, ready to give out from under me.

I’d felt pain before but nothing like this. This was just pure agony, like period cramps times a hundred.

I whimper, more in relief than anything else, as I finally make it to the deck. The door sweeps open and I stumble inside, frantically looking for Yaknaur.

“Yaknaur?”

My inside knot, anxiety flaring higher. The area is empty. He’s not here. My chin wobbles as tears flood my eyes.

Ugh, no. Don’t you dare cry. I berate myself. He’s got to be here somewhere.

“Memn—” I start to call, only for the sound end in a yelp as the next bout sends me to my knees. “Ahh!”

I don’t know what to do. What should I do?

My pulse roars in my ears. I blink once, and then the ground finds the side of my face. I’m out cold, unconscious.

How long I lay like that, I don’t know. Somewhere in the void I hear someone speaking to me. Male and deep.

“Female.”

I recognise the voice but it is not one of my hunters.

“Female…”

I crack open my eyes weakly, blinded by the brightness of the room. I quickly take in where I am and how I got here. I’m still laid across the floor, the metal cool against my skin. The cage is directly in front of me, only a few metres away. Darvik’s huge shape is crouched within, his luminous eyes delving into me with an unknown urgency.

“You are in need.”

My head swims as I struggling to take in what he’s saying. I attempt to push up into a sitting position, only to find the task too much. I clutch at my middle and lower back down again as more bile rushes into my throat.

Oh, please. Someone. Make it stop.

“You are in need,” he repeats. “You are suffering.”

I want to scoff at him. No shit, Sherlock?

“Free me.”

Weakly, I shake my head. No way. Was he nuts? Did he think I was stupid?

He edges closer to the bars, his long black claws gripping them tight.

“Open the cage.” When I don’t respond, he shouts, making me flinch. “Now, female! You are testing my patience!”

Jesus, did he have to make so much noise? My head was banging with the worst headache known to mankind. I give a whine and my hair falls forwards to cover my face. I don’t want him to see me like this. So weak and helpless.

“Darvik, seriously…” I huff, “Go away. This is not a good time right now.”

He says more but this time he sounds far away for some reason. I feel that familiar pull trying to draw back into that void of nothingness.

“Female!”

The hard command jolts me awake and a breeze stirs against my leg. Panic surges as I catch the sight of something large serpentine-like slithering only a few inches away from my person.

On instinct, I react, fear grabbing me fast. I lift an arm protectively as though to fend off an oncoming threat. When I look again I instantly feel like an idiot. It’s Darvik’s tail. He’s trying to grab at me with it, its thickened tip almost grazing my thigh.

“Release me,” he demands again.

“For the last time… No.”

He snorts, agitation growing. He paces a few steps and then returns to his spot to pretty much snarl in my direction. “Foolish stubborn creature.”

“You’re one to talk.” A smile quirks weakly across my mouth.

My gaze finds his and in that moment I am captured by him. I feel like a boat lost at sea and he’s a lighthouse on the horizon, leading and keeping me steady. He’s all I can see. His scarred beastly face. His restless mandibles click and chew as though troubled. Even though he tries to hide it, I can see he’s worried. It gives me a nugget of comfort to know I am not alone in this time of crisis.

He presses closer, slides an arm through, offering me a huge hand, beckoning me to go to him.

“Do not fear me.” He hunkers lower, crouching within the shadows in an attempt to appear non-threatening. “By my oath, I do not wish you harm, *Taz’arin*.”

I do not reply. Apprehensive.

“By my oath! I swear it!”

I watch in a mixture of horror and wonder as he grabs for the bars again, ever so slowly pulling on them. A loud creak follows and, to my surprise, I see them start to bend. The floor beneath me vibrates; his strength is impressive. Every muscle in his shoulders and arms are bulging with the strain.

“Wait. Don’t... Don’t do that.”

He pauses, his eyes molten and yet sharp as a razor blade.

“You will either come to me or I will come to you. Make your choice.” The growl is like thunder, stirring the air like a gathering storm.

It was kinda funny really, ironic even. He really did sound like Sin'Chila sometimes. So bossy.

Agony rocks through me again and it's enough to make me decide. I can't stay like this forever. I have to do something. I need his help, whether I wanted to admit it or not.

Ok, fuck this. I'm done. I surrender. You win.

Instead of moving towards the cage, I go for the lazier option. I drag myself up to a stand, leaning against the back of the seats for support. It only takes me a few steps but I make it to the controls desk. My legs wobble as I swipe at one of the screens. I don't fully understand the symbols flashing there, so it takes me a few tries and errors before I find the sequence I'm looking for.

"Come on, you useless piece of-- Yes! Got it!"

A loud beep sounds and I hear the cell door behind me swooshes open.

I stiffen. Waiting. Uneasy of what would come next. As soon as the deed is done I'm worried I have made a mistake, but it's too late now.

Out of nowhere, a pair of powerful arms sweep me up. My head snaps up and suddenly he's there…

Darvik.

Surprised, I gasp, even as he cradles me gently to his massive chest. I take in his alien face and his eyes stare down at me, holding mine for a beat.

"The Med bay." He tugs me nearer, bringing me so close that his breath fans my cheek. "Show me."

Unable to do little else, I lift an arm and point to the door. "Out there… down the hall…"

With swift steps, he takes us from the main deck, following my directions. I feel like I'm floating in his arms, not quite real. Everything is starting to spin again.

"No, not that way," I correct. "Back there. The second door down."

I don't know why he's doing this. I don't understand why he is helping me. He should be taking this moment to escape, to flee for freedom. But no, he's not. With ease, he carries me across the threshold and into the healing room.

I bite back a scream as he slowly lowers me onto an examination bench. A pillow of prongs rise up from its surface, bracing my form into a position that helps to ease the discomfort.

"Easy now," Darvik croons. "Be still."

He leaves my side and I hear things being toppled and thrown aside in a haste. Darvik sweeps through the nearby shelving, creating chaos in his rush to find something.

My senses dim as my consciousness threatens to leave me again. I can't fight it back anymore.

"Please…" I whisper to the room as my head lolls. I'm not sure who I am speaking to at this point. The blur of the ceiling above me is my only companion. "Please don't hurt me."

From my left, I hear a clack of disapproval. Darvik comes forward, suddenly at my side again. He leans over me like a mountain. Huge and formidable. He presses something into the crook of my arm and a sharp sting follows. Coldness rushes through my limbs. Almost instantly, every muscle in my body begins to relax, unknotting all at once. A drunken haze takes hold as all of my pain subsides, as if by magic.

"Oh, that feels much better." I groan in relief. "That's so good."

Delirious, I reach to the side, searching for someone.

Sin'Chila.

Memnis.

Yaknaur.

"Where are you?" I mutter to no one.

A hand finds mine, roughened and large. Its size swallows mine entirely, oddly gentle.

"*Taz'arin.*"

It's him. Darvik. He's still here. He hasn't left me.

I can't seem to keep my eyes open anymore. I'm fading fast.

A touch finds my cheek, stroking a path to my chin. I try to speak but it only comes out a whimper.

The blackness comes and I have no choice but to trust and surrender to it.

And with that, I am gone, into a deep but hollow sleep.

Chapter 41

Dreams haunt me. Ones that I can't escape from.

"*You're disgusting," Jason says as he stands over me. His visage is blurred but somehow I know it's him. His voice. His eyes. His face.*

Everything around me shimmers, hazy and not quite real. My heart is pounding. I can't seem to make head nor tails of anything.

"*You're a slut, do you know that?" He continues to bellow at me. "You're nothing but an animal, just like them… an animal…"*

Confused, my chest hurts at his words. Why is he saying these things to me? Why does he hate me so much?

Without warning, Jason is suddenly gone, leaving me alone in the darkness once again.

More voices come forward, although I'm not sure where they are coming from or whom they belong to.

"*Disgusting." They keep calling me."Wild."*

"*That is not a baby, it's a 'thing'." Another says and my anxiety rockets higher.*

I want to speak up and fight against them but I am unable to move at all. My mouth won't work. Words will not emerge. My body doesn't even feel like it belongs to me.

Am I a ghost? Where am I?

"*Kill it." The voices demand and sheer terror strangles in my throat.*

"*Kill it."*

"*Destroy it!"*

"No!" My cry finally emerges, raw and weak. "Please, no..."

"*Taza'rin.*"

Darvik. I can hear him. He's calling to me.

"Stay with me, little *hooman*. Follow my voice."

I'm being cradled in a cocoon of numbness. Where pain should have been, I felt nothing, floating along on a sea of stillness.

"Take it. You must drink."

Something is pressed against my lips and I open on instinct. I take the gel-like capsule into my mouth and it dissolves fast, sending a gush of cool fluids down the back of my dried out throat. So wonderful.

“Don't…” My voice croaks with weakness. “Don’t leave me.”

A huge hand clasps mine and in an instant, I know everything is going to be fine.

I’m safe.

Darvik’s POV

Her skin is hot, burning and still, she does not fully wake. For what seems like an age, Darvik sits at the female’s side. Waiting. Watching. Her strange furry brows dip with troubled rest, her pain having subsided long ago when he had administered the serum.

Breast pounding, he wills himself to calmness. He had feared the worst. The moment he had seen her entering the deck he had known all was not right with her. He had sensed it, smelt her agony, felt it as though it were his own.

Never before had he felt such helplessness. He; a great and skilled warrior in his prime. His desire to protect has been paramount. No longer could he deny the truth of what lied right before him. This creature… This tiny, pitiful *hooman* female had stolen more than just his pride from him. Even his rational thinking mind was at risk.

Leaning forward, he combs his claws through her locks, feeling the weight of its silken length. Everything about her was like a beacon to him. From the tips of her clawless toes to the top of her shining head. Even now, looking at her closely, his need to be closer to her beat at him. Insistent. To touch. To smell. To mark her as his own.

Following the need, he slides his arms carefully beneath her. She gives a soft moan as he draws her up, cradling her to his chest. Something within him roars in victory. A deep knowing echoes, filling him with a wholeness that he had never known. And in that moment, he imagined what it would be like, to have her as *his* female. His chosen mate. His--

“Step away from the female.”

The deep snarl from behind him causes him to straighten, his head slowly turning towards the door, every muscle in his body tightening, ready to face the danger at his back. The *hooman* against him moans and her eyes begin to open.

The three hunters standing there are his enemy, strong and large, like himself. Formidable. Their eyes blaze, the violence in them clear, dark with the need for blood.

His blood.

“Cretin! You will not be given mercy this time! What have you done to her?!”

Chaos forces me to stir and I awake to the sound of heated arguing. Fury filled roars and clicks batter at my eardrums and I blink, trying to seek the source of all the noise. Eyelids fluttering, I take in my surroundings and gasp as I see them.

My three hunters are in the room with us and I’m still laid across the examination table. Groggily, I stare up at Sin’Chila, who is leaning over me, his face contorted with worry.

“Chakria. Are you hurt?”

Hurt? I frown, my head still a bit foggy. Why would be hurt? What’s going on?

It slowly starts to dawn on me. Memnis peers at me from around his brother’s shoulder, only to then spin towards the other two males nearby. More snarls follow as Yaknaur pins Darvik to the wall, nearly hefting him from his feet, despite his much bigger size. Their jaws spread as they hiss at each other in turn, their eyes wild with frenzied aggression.

“You dare to touch my female! I will have your head! I vow it!” Yaknaur bellows, ready to render the other male right there in front of us all.

“Don’t…” I try to rasp, struggling to sit upright. Sin’Chila slips an arm around my shoulders and I allow him to help me up. “Yaknaur, let him go!”

“What has he done to you?” Sin’Chila asks, searching the length of my body as though trying to find some kind of damage. “Tell me now. I must know!” He trills quickly, desperate for my answer.

My gaze flies between him and Darvik. My concern grows as Yaknaur sinks his sharp claws further into his neck, causing rivulets of golden blood to spill down his powerful chest.

“He hasn’t done anything wrong,” I explain quickly as I clutch at Sin’Chila’s arm like it's a lifeline. “Release him! I am the one who let him out of his cage, he wasn’t trying to attack me. He was helping me!”

“Helping?” Sin’Chila echoes, head tilting in confusion. His ropey dreds brush against my shoulder at the movement.

I nod and continue. “Yes. I don’t know why but I was having such horrible pain, here…” I gesture to my stomach. I give Sin’Chila a pleading look. “I tried to look for you but you weren’t here. I had no other choice. If it hadn’t been for Darvik…” I trail off, not even wanting to consider it. Only god knows what would have happened.

Memnis steps forward to my other side, nuzzling into the top of my hair with a purr. He smells like wilderness and earth; a balm to my chaotic anxiety. Sin'Chila lifts a paw and presses it to my belly.

"Tell me, where is this pain now?"

"I don't know. It's gone now." I nod towards Darvik, relieved to find both he and Yaknaur have stopped snapping at each other and are now focussed on me. "Darvik brought me here and gave me something, and now I feel much better."

Yakanur whips back to Darvik, shoving him into the wall once more for good measure, as if unable to help himself. He emits a drawn-out hiss. "What did you do? Speak now!"

Darvik, no longer fighting his attacker, simply to looks to Sin'Chila, cool and collected.

"All is well. The suckling inside of her womb has grown too fast for her *hooman* body to adjust to. It was creating some complications."

"You lie!" Yaknaur grips him tighter but Darvik merely shrugs.

"See for yourself." He gestures towards a nearby set of floating screens.

As if by his words alone, they float forward and we are able to make out images and strange graphs flickering across each one.

"I have run some tests, as you can see," Darvik nonchalantly continues to explain. "The suckling has corrected itself naturally and has settled into a better position, one that should no longer cause the *nima* distress. The danger has passed now."

"Memnis," Sin'Chila pipes up then, not once looking away from me. "Take our brother away, I wish to speak with our female alone."

"But brother… the Vindas…"

A single, pointed glance is enough to make the smaller hunter pause. Bowing his head, he steps back and heads towards the door.

"As you wish." He takes his other hulking brother by the arm, practically having to rip him away from his victim. "Come, Yaknaur. We must go. You heard what he said."

Yaknaur struggles a little, reluctant to back away when it's so clear he's desperate for a fight.

"I will not--!"

"That is enough!" Sin'Chila roars then, patience gone. He snaps back towards the others hunters, making his meaning obvious. "Now is not the time for your squabbling. Do you never learn, Yaknaur? If you cannot contain your fury then leave. I grow tired of your insolence. Go. Now!"

I’m shocked, as is everyone else. It’s the first time I’ve heard Sin’Chila speak to one of his brother’s like this.

Yaknaur huffs and Memnis yanks on him one more time, enough to force him to release Darvik. Yaknaur flashes him one last glower before leaving the area, the door sliding quietly shut behind them.

Sin’Chila returns his attention to the holographic images floating beside the table I’m laid upon. I have no idea what any of them mean but his brows are furrowed, deep in concentration as he swipes across each one with a pointed claw.

“Are you well? How do you feel now? I must complete a more thorough examination on you.” He turns back to me and cups the side of my face tenderly. “For now, you must rest. I cannot risk this happening again.”

In corner of my vision, Darvik shifts on his feet, silently standing there, observing our exchange. Noticing my focus on the other male, Sin’Chila slowly turns to face him. For a long drawn-out moment, he says nothing. His stare is endless. The silence is so quiet and taut that I bet they could both probably hear my pounding heartbeat.

My belly knots, worrying forming there. I reach out and place my hand on my mate's arm, seeking to soothe him. Somehow, on a deeper level, I could tell he was unsettled.

“He didn’t hurt me,” I remind him quietly. “He helped me and I--”

Sin’Chila lifts a huge paw, motioning for my silence. I still and allow the moment to continue to grow between the three of us. Tight. On edge.

“*Vindas.*” Sin’Chila finally says after what felt like a lifetime. “I have underestimated you, yet again.”

Darvik stares back at him, stony face and as proud as ever. His shoulders are set, waiting to accept anything that may come his way. Fearless. His gaze keeps sliding me, delving, missing nothing.

Sin’Chila tilts his head, his mottled brows deepening. “Everywhere you go, trouble goes with you. I grow tired of seeing your face. Your presence offends me.”

Darvik snorts and he doesn’t even try to hide his dawning amusement. The huge giant still had the stubbornness to stand there like a king amongst peasants.

“Understand this,” Sin’Chila says coolly. “This vessel belongs to me, along with all that resides within it. They are each under my care and keeping. The safety of my clan is my highest priority.”

The humour in Darvik’s face fades, replaced by something almost unusual. Something raw.

Respect?

“I understand.”

Another long pause follows before Sin'Chila speaks again, harsh like a whip "Nothing here belongs to you. *Nothing.*"

Darvik's mouth splays a little, his tusks wriggling as though he wants to retort but is holding back.

He says nothing.

Sin'Chila relaxes a notch at my side, his solid thigh pressed against mine as he holds me.

"But neither am I fool to not acknowledge when an honourable deed is done." He speaks the words as though it's taking every ounce of his will to do so. Begrudgingly. "I… owe you greatly for what you have done for my female this day."

My mouth drops open, speechless. I peer between them both, just sitting back, watching their interaction with growing interest. Holy cow. Did he just *thank* Darvik? Maybe not so openly, but it was there, loud and clear.

Darvik sneers. "I did not do this thing for *you."* His gaze once again finds me.

Something in me blooms into awareness and my tummy tightens. He'd done all of this, risked his own safety and the danger of my hunters, for me. To help me.

Unable to stop myself, I offer him a small smile of gratitude and his head inclines in a curious manner.

"So I see," Sin'Chila growls, drawing me harder to him. Possessively. "Very well. As a reward, I shall give you that which you desire above all else."

The air thickens suddenly. Darvik growl is lethal as he stalks forward a step. The sound isn't threatening. In fact, it's heavy with anticipation. Almost hungry. Again, he's fixated on me.

"*Yessss*." He hisses and I shudder, goosebumps spreading across my skin.

Liquid heat pools low within my body, in places where it shouldn't.

Surely, Sin'Chila didn't mean to--

"Your freedom."

At that, Darvik freezes and his confusion matches that of my own.

Without missing a beat, Sin'Chila continues. "From this moment on, you are no longer our prisoner. Now do not misunderstand. This small mercy is not one that you deserve nor should have. It is for my female's sake that I do this. Consider this final." He sweeps his hand out, motioning towards the doorway. "You will go. Go now, and never return to this place again. To do so would warrant your own demise. I have already held my kin back too many times, but I will not do so again should you choose to ignore this last shred of leniency that I offer you."

“Sin’Chila?” I whisper his name, reeling at this sudden shift of events.

He’s letting Darvik go. It takes a good solid minute or two for it to sink in. He’s free to leave. I’m elated. Relieved. Absolutely shocked. And yet also… saddened.

“Blood for blood. Life for a life. Tis a fair exchange.” Even as Sin’Chila speaks, his stare is sharp, gleaming with an inner cunning. “This is what you wanted *Vindas*, no? So go. No one will stop you.”

I hold my breath. Darvik is scowling at us both, yet behind it I sense turmoil brooding quietly. He hesitates, considering the offer and for some reason a lump forms in my throat. And then the truth of it hits me…

I don’t want him to go.

Before that thought can fully register, Darvik nods. Without a word, he turns and strides towards the door with meaningful steps. Just when I think he’s about to glance back one last time to me, he doesn’t and that’s when my eyes start to burn.

The door opens and then closes behind him. With no goodbyes and without warning, he’s suddenly gone, leaving only me and Sin’Chila left in the med bay.

Sin’Chila lifts me further into him and I burrow into his chest, wrapping my arms around his neck. I hide my face from him, hoping he won’t see the treacherous tears ready to spill down my face. He croons at me gently, cupping the back of my nape which his massive hand.

It was over. It was done. Darvik was gone.

I should have been pleased. I should have been happy for him. And I was... Right?

I clutch Sin’Chila harder, fighting against myself when all I wanted to do was break down and cry.

Chapter 42

I am being made to rest. First for one day, and then another after that. I don't understand why my mates are forcing the issue, as I have pretty much recovered already, but at the same time, I am thankful to have this chance to just nap and reflect on things. I am not myself and we have all noticed it. I'm lethargic and spend most of my time curled up in our nest, sleeping or in a haze that doesn't want to let me go. I put it down to just being tired and my body recovering, but it's so much more than that. Deep down, I know what the issue is, I just don't want to say it. Not out loud. And knowing that my males are aware is making things worse.

I sigh and nestle further into the leaves beneath me, surrounded by warmth and safety. It's not enough though to dispel the odd emptiness that's aching within my chest.

I rub at my face, frustrated. I need to get a hold of myself. This isn't like me at all. I shouldn't be like this. I need to get up.

Someone approaches and my bed crunches as a body lowers to kneel down next to me. A thigh brushes my back as said person leans over to peer at my face. I look up and find that it's Sin'Chila, and I offer him a weak smile.

"Hi."

His frown is troubled; an expression that seems to be a regular thing for him as of late, filling me with guilt.

He reaches around and places his large hand against the curve of my belly. My baby. *His* child.

He eyes the bundle of fruits they had brought me earlier on, still untouched.

"Speak to me, Chakria," he says. "You must eat. It is imperative for both you and the youngling that you do so."

"I know." I shrug, uncertain of what to say. If I could snap out of this shroud of lowness I'd be fine. If only it were that simple. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

Sin'Chila nods with a trill as if in understanding. He observes my face closely, searching for something. His eyes are bright and knowing.

His jaws splays, tusk clacking as he hesitates before speaking again. " *He* is gone. There is no need to despair for him."

I don't need to ask as to whom he's talking about. It's almost as if he can read my thoughts. Like a ghost, Darvik is always in them, I cannot seem to exorcise him from my mind. I know he's gone and it's something I should be glad about, and yet I'm not. I feel so many emotions. An unwanted grief because he'd finally left us. Yes, I missed him, even though I had barely even known him. And then there was the shame, the self-loathing for daring to think of

another when I had three capable and affectionate males to love me. My thoughts were traitorous, to me and to them.

I didn't deserve them.

I nod and turn away, praying that my face didn't give my inner betrayal away too much.

"That's good," I say, quietly.

Lies. God, I'm such a bad liar.

Claw-tipped fingers take my chin and Sin'Chila draws me back towards him, forcing me to meet his gaze. He bends closer, the length of one charcoal ropey lock dangling down to brush against my cheek. The curve of his wide jaw flexes.

"He is not one of us," he states lowly and without any anger.

Still, I swallow thickly. "I know."

His head tilts, a curious gesture, even as his molten stare all but burns into me. Unblinking. As though attempting to delve into my very soul.

"Then why do your eyes grieve, my female? I see pain within them, sorrow at his loss."

I clench my lids shut and shake my head. I don't want to talk about this. Not now. Not ever. I want to forget about Darvik. About everything. I can't face this feeling, these chaotic emotions.

"I don't--"

As soon as I start to voice my denial he cuts in fast and sure, holding my face captive even when I try to turn away from him again.

"Do not deny it. I know you well, my mate. I see all."

"I just pitied him, that's all."

He crooks an alien mottled brow. "Only pity?"

No . It was more than that. More than mere pity. I felt a connection to Darvik because I knew what it was like to be the outsider, the one often looked down upon. For years I'd always been seen as the 'invalid', the weak one, as though I weren't even something human but something made of glass. I knew what it felt like to be unwanted.

I sit up then and spin to face my mate, tucking my legs beneath me. Sin'Chila gathers me to him, shifting me until I am sat within the V of his strong lap. His searing heat is like a balm to my senses.

"Please, just imagine it for a moment, Sin'Chila," I urge then, peering up at him. "Imagine a life without your brothers. No clan. No family. No one to feel bonded to. Darvik doesn't have

those things, and that's what makes me sad for him."

Sin'Chila snorts, sweeping a lock of my hair aside so, so carefully. "Your heart is too soft, female. He is not deserving of such thoughts. He is of bad blood, you know this. A tainted male. It is his fate to have nothing." He trails off and a shadow casts deep within his eyes. Thoughtful. "Although…A life without my brothers… I cannot imagine such a thing."

I am warmed at his honesty, even a little taken aback by his emotional response. As a leader, Sin'Chila had never been one for sentimentality. Yet here he was, outright voicing his love for his siblings and if anything it made me admire him even more.

My focus wanders back to Darvik. If given the chance, he'd have probably been different too. He had a gentle side too; I knew because I'd seen it many times. But he was also primitive in his ways, somewhat different from my own hunters, too wild and untamed to be considered one of them.

"There are no excuses," Sin'Chila declares firmly, his voice a low rumble. "Reason or not, he threatened to take you from us. A great insult I could never allow to pass."

"Well…" I hedge awkwardly, chewing at my lip. "What does it matter? He's gone now, so…" Again, that knot is in my throat again as my earlier low mood slowly creeps back in. What was the point in talking about any of this? The deed was done. There no going back. I had to accept and move on with my life.

Sin'Chila nods in curt agreement. "Indeed. So let that be the end of it."

The end of it. Yes. I had to get past this and forget about Darvik. It was time to let him go. I only hoped that, wherever he was, he was safe and thriving.

A hand touches my shoulder and I snap to with a jolt.

"Come," Sin'Chila says, rising to a stand and taking me with him in one swift motion. I curl into him, cradled in his arms. I wrap mine around his neck, enjoying the closeness. "Let us go and see the others. Perhaps some distraction will make you feel better. Yes?"

I nod, not really having anything else to say. "Ok. Sure."

Without further ado, he walks and carries me out of the door…

As soon as I arrive on the deck, they all gather around me in welcome. Memnis chirps happily, nuzzling in from my left. His hot breath skims my skin and I shiver. Yaknaur towers to my right, burrowing into my throat and hissing in my scent.

"There you are," he says. "At last, you have decided to join us again."

“How do you feel, *Lartee?”* Memnis asks.

I offer them a small smile. “Better. The rest did me some good.”

They all croon, happy with my answer. Sin’Chila tightens his hold and in that moment everything feels right again. Some of my anxiety drains away and leaves me. Reaching out, I stroke each monstrously loving face in turn, giggling when Yaknaur nips at my palm lightly. His tusks are thick and sharp even as he takes great care not to hurt me.

They argue for a time as to whom I get to sit with, each of them eager to have me close to them or in their laps. At this point, I feel like a god damned kitten as claws and roughened hands pet and stroke at me. I roll my eyes, smiling at their antics.

Really... These males... Despite all their scary gruffness, they really could be clingy. They never grew bored with being around me, each of them having the patience of a saint and the loyalty of a hound. And I loved being with them too equally as much. There wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do for them.

I huff a laugh. “All right, that’s enough, you can put me down now.”

I wriggle from Sin’Chila’s arms and he lowers me to my feet. All three of them advance around me, closing me within a protective circle of muscle and male strength. Unbidden, something within me awakens and stirs, like a feline arching, craving its owner's attention.

“I must speak with you, Brother,” Memnis says then, breaking the moment, turning serious. “There is something I should show you. It may be of some importance.”

“Very well.” Sin’Chila glances at me as though uncertain as to whether to leave my side.

“It’s fine. You guys carry on with whatever you were doing,” I say, shooing them away with a gesture. I point to the pile of sleeping *Daku* in the far corner of the room. “I’ll be over here if you need me.”

I move away from them and they turn to face one of the nearby holographic screens. Images sear into flickering life, rotating slowly to show the outline of our vessel. In a low tone, Memnis speaks to Sin’Chila, pointing at something in particular, though I cannot hear what they are discussing.

“Are you certain?” I hear Sin’Chila ask with a slight note of what I consider to be concern.

“Yes. I have recalibrated each of our maps. For some reason, they are not picking up all of the nearby heat signals. Some of our shields keep dropping too, though I know not why.”

“That is odd.”

“System fault, perhaps?”

“Maybe. It is difficult to say for certain.”

Memnis hums in agreement. “What do you suggest?”

Sin'Chila straightens. "Watch the main shields. If they continue to falter then we may have to do some repairs. For now, I will go out to patrol the perimeters. I will go *alone* this time . "

"Is that wise?"

"Wise, no. Necessary, yes." Sin'Chila adds. "I would much prefer it if the two of you remained here. Guard the ship and our female. I will return as swiftly as I can."

Memnis bows in acknowledgement to the unmoving order. "Yes. As you command then, brother."

Sin'Chila takes his helmet from a nearby wall and slips it onto his face. Air hisses as it seals into position and the strange symbols on his wrist gauntlet flare with glowing red. As he clenches his fist, two razor-sharp blades eject out, gleaming in the light. His spear is next, which he snaps out, forcing it to elongate beyond his own towering height, crackling with some unseen energy force.

"Wait for my return."

And with that, Sin'Chila heads towards the door, purpose in his step.

As he passes me, my hand flies out, brushing against his armoured chest. "Is everything Ok?"

Sin'Chila pauses briefly at my side, leaning down to caress my cheek. "Yes, Chakria. Be at ease. I will not be far."

His short reply fills me with worry and he doesn't spare me a further moment as he continues out of the door and away from sight. I shoot Memnis a questioning look but he rotates away, refusing to share any details.

Ugh. Typical.

Yaknaur comes over and nudges me gently towards the trio of hounds. "Go. Do not worry. You know as well as I that nothing deters my brother once his mind is set."

Huffing, but willing to let it slide, I make my way towards the three hulking curled up creatures in the corner. I lower myself, huddling my human body between them. Each one lifts their head, offering a quick yip or chin lick in welcome. Two of them rise, moving away, leaving only the smallest one, Pup, at my side. Once comfy, I start to throw their favourite pebble for them, laughing lightly as Prowler and Drooler scramble over each other in a desperate bid to get to it first. Their quills quiver, their panting breaths a sign of their excitement.

My thoughts drift, slipping back towards memories of my home planet. To say that I missed it would be untrue. I did, and yet I didn't. I certainly didn't miss the people or the busy society we humans forced ourselves to live in. But there were times when I'd think back on the smaller pleasures of Earth; like watching TV, reading a book or even going shopping. Those are the things that I missed. But would I be willing to trade everything I had here in order to go back to that life? At the cost of giving up my hunters?

No way in hell.

This was where I belonged now. In hindsight, regardless of all the hassle and horror I'd gone through since coming here, I was glad that it had happened. I was happy here.

I lob the rock again and one of the hounds rushes forward and nabs it. Prowler circles as if to return to me, only to pause midway. He drops his prize and sniffs at the air suddenly, a low growl forming in his throat.

Weird...

I frown and peer around the room, my skin prickling as if expecting to find something out of place, a reason for his sudden shift in demeanour.

My hound prowls towards the entrance, which is still sitting wide open. His snarls grow, becoming feral. Lips curl and teeth flash, snapping at the air. No… At *something* beyond the doorway.

"What's wrong, boy?" I talk to him, but the beast doesn't respond or move away. "What is it?"

My brows deepen. Memnis, hearing the commotion, looks over his shoulder with a questioning lift of his brow.

I shrug. "I don't know what's wrong with him. He's not usually like this." I return my focus to the hound and rise to my feet. I try to peer into the shadows, confused.

What is he looking at?

"Here, boy," I call. "That's enough. Come." I pat at my leg, hoping he'd return to my side, but he doesn't.

If anything, his venomous growls increase even more. His beading eyes are trained on something and growing wilder with each passing second. Kinda freaking me out, to be honest.

Without warning, Prowler lunges forwards, skidding out into the corridor, howling loudly like something possessed.

With a yelp of surprise, I dash out to follow him. My bare feet clang across the darkened steel floor as I part-run-part-stumble my way out into the corridor too. I draw abruptly still as I find that my lizard-like friend has stopped halfway down and is going nuts, barking savagely at something near the… um, ceiling?

What the...

I inch forward, on edge, cautious, only to then freeze…

Alarm surges as something shimmers there, hidden amongst the piping and within the darkness where the dim glow of the lights don't quite cover. The metal wall ripples there like

the surface of a pond; an eerily familiar sight. The silvery outline takes shape and steadily I begin to realise what it is.

A figure.

Something is there, or rather someone. Clinging to the wall like a spider. Inhuman and huge.

The haze shifts and a solid body takes its place revealing the herculean shape of a hunter. Male, but not one of mine... And not Darvik either.

A deadly array of clicks echo and fear rips down my back. A pair of blood-red eyes flash into being from the gloom, staring right at me. I make out the trademark long thick locks and heavily muscled body, a splitting grin of tusks that seem to sneer at me.

Oh... shit.

I am given no warning, no time to even register what is about to happen. With a roar, the unknown Yautja lunges down from his height, coming straight for me. I spin, emitting a shrill shriek of terror, my heart flying into my throat.

“Memnis! Yaknaur!” I scream, the sound echoing. “Intruder!”

And then I start to run.

Chapter 43

Sin'Chila's POV

Sin'Chila scans the horizon, searching its vast and endless length for something, though he knew not what. The trees creak, their vibrant leaves swaying in a breeze. Shadows cast, hiding him from all and any who may wish to seek him out. He draws in a hiss, inhaling the scents of his homeland. He tastes each one, recognising every detail, every creature that might have passed through the area. Crouched, he shifts position within the tree. Alert. His helmet is heavy, blocking some of his natural sight, but it allows him the advantage of tracking the heat signals of any potential prey nearby. Creatures of the jungle still, some of them scuttling away in the foliage as if aware of his presence, anticipating a predator amongst them. With his own senses heightened, a sensation licks at his back; a feeling as old as time itself, warning him of nearby danger. His instincts never lied.

But what was it? He could not rightly tell. Memnis' earlier warnings still rang through his mind. Some strange happenings had been occurring with their ship. Systems were not operating as they should be, yet having checked each one he could find any damages or reasons to cause this.

Odd. Very odd indeed.

For what seemed like an age, he continues to watch the wilderness. Wary. Unable to shake the notion that something was amiss. His gaze scores the ground below him, seeing nothing. In the distance, their ship sits like a temple upon a crest. Shining and brilliant. His home.

There is no movement and he hears nothing save for the subtly controlled hisses of his breath.

All is quiet. All is still. Which gives him only little comfort.

Restless, he leaps from one trunk to another, his footing deft and stealthy, like a true hunter of his kind. He circles the perimeter of his territory, scouting for any signs of disturbance. The sun rises in the sky, creeping higher and higher as time passes. Before he knows it, its brightness is starting to dip again a sure sign that night would soon be upon them.

Uncertain, he leaps down with a thud. The ground shakes with the impact and he emits a low trill, continuously peering around. Expectant.

It is nothing . He reasons to himself. *Tis but a trick of your mind. All is well.*

Huffing, he begins to head for the ramp, intending the return to the others. He makes it a few steps and then pauses, a musky scent coming at him from nowhere. Unfamiliar.

He inhales deep and slowly turns his head, looking down. There, slightly concealed, he spots an unnatural groove in the terrain, barely visible. Moving closer, he crouches low, a frown forming.

A footprint.

He reaches out, brushing his fingers into its shape, feeling it for every nuance and imperfection. It is of a formidable size. Male, highly likely. Clawed and webbed, much like his own. Definitely Yautja. Though not made by that of his kin.

The Vindas? he shakes his head. *No* . That hunter should have moved on and been long gone by now. Surely the fool would not tempt fate again. Not when--

A sound comes. Harsh and sharp, familiar in its clarity. A shriek…

Like that of a *hooman.*

His hooman.

His head jerks up. Dread and fury lace through his being, ripping away his logic. The cry comes again and it's enough to force him to his feet. Gripping his spear, Sin'Chila races for the ship, his legs burning with all the speed he can muster.

I run like the devil himself his chasing me. Heavy footsteps pound behind me, gaining fast and another scream rips through my throat. Sheer fear has me in its hold as adrenaline drives me into moving faster.

The hunter behind me is right at my back as I hurtle down the hall, aiming for the deck. But I'm not fast enough. I can feel his breath on my nape. He so, so close. I'm not going to make it.

"Memnis!"

As if my desperate cry has conjured them into being, Memnis and Yaknaur appear at the other end of the corridor. They race towards me, eyes ablaze and roaring as they quickly notice the male chasing me down.

" *Lartee* !"

Just when I think Yakanur is about to barrel right into me, he launches up and twists in mid-air, flying over my person to land on my other side, slamming straight down onto the intruder. I don't stop to look. Frantic, I head straight for Memnis, diving into his waiting arms like a frightened child.

“Oh my god! Oh my god!” I’m blinded by panic. “What’s happening? Who the fuck is *that* !”

Without answering, Memnis squeezes me once before placing me behind him, pressing me back towards the wall.

“Stay here!”

And with that, he rushes in after his brother and into the fight. In fearful awe, I watch as the two of them grapple against the larger male, trying to use sheer brute strength to bring him down to the ground. The other male is far too quick for them. Swiftly, he dodges each blow, biting and slashing out with claws and tusks, his red eyes menacing and burning with only one purpose.

To kill.

Arm flying out, Memnis shoots out an array of spiked blades from his gauntlet. They whizz through the air, only one of them making their mark. The male snarls, rearing back. Gripping the knife, the hunter tears it free from his shoulder, not even flinching at the pain, before sneering darkly at my mate.

“Weakling.” His voice rumbles like an animal, so deep that my translator takes a while to convert what he’s saying.

They all surge at one another once more, battling it out, muscle vs muscle. Strength vs strength.

I can’t breathe. I can’t even think. I lean back further into the wall as the world spins. My vision starts to swim. I’m hyperventilating.

Oh god, please don’t pass out. I will to myself. *Not now* .

The other male is taking on mine with frightening ease. He tosses Memnis aside, before sending out a kick to Yaknaur’s midriff. Winded, he stumbles back. No sooner had he fallen, both he and his brother are back on their feet, rushing at their enemy with vigour.

Seemingly, out of nowhere, another figure emerges, sprinting his way towards us and directly into combat.

“Sin’Chila.” I sigh his name as I recognise him.

The walls and floor vibrate under their assault. Snarls and howls of pain ricochet around me, growing in crescendo, matching the raging rush of my pulse within my ears.

I shriek when Memnis is grabbed. Held by his throat, the intruder lifts him high, holding him there for a beat before slamming him down the ground.

What do I do? What could I do? There wasn’t any way that I could help them; I wasn’t a Yautja like them. With any attempt to do so I knew I’d probably get crushed in the chaos. I

feel so useless at this moment. My mates are fighting for our safety and I'm just standing there, quietly having a mini breakdown.

"Yakanur! Get up!" I shout when I realise he's down again and having difficulty getting back to his feet. He staggers, shaking his head and it's then that I see the luminous blood seeping down the side of his face.

Sin'Chila twirls his spear with eerie grace and skill, swinging it out hard into the unknown hunter's chest. The strike is so hard that the male is ripped from his feet and sent flying down the hall…

Exactly towards my location.

I yelp and dive away at the last minute as his herculean body slams into the wall and the metal dents under the impact. Hot air stirs around me. I start to sidestep, hoping the hunter won't realise I'm right there next to him.

He's too close. Far too close for comfort.

I hear hurried footsteps approach.

"Chakria!" Sin'Chila calls. "Move away! Now!"

Spitting blood, the hunter starts to rise, bracing his palms to the floor, trying to lift himself to a stand. I whisper a gasp and suddenly his head lifts and a set of glowing crimson eyes meet mine. His flaring grin is manic as a shard fear impales me, stealing my breath in an instant. I'm pretty much doomed at this point. I know it. My trio rushes to reach me first but it is too late...

I try to bolt away and the Yautja launches at me, so fast, like a train at full speed. I don't even have the chance to make a sound. Claws snag into my hair and a scorching pain rips down my back. Legs flailing, I finally scream as the male drags me up, practically lifting me with ease from my feet to dangle in his hold.

"Let me go!"

Tears pour down my face at the agony. I kick out, struggling wildly, desperate to be free.

The hunter turns, holding me out as if I'm nothing more than a squirming rabbit for the others to see.

"One more step… and the female dies."

I'm absolutely terrified and the pain is unbearable. My wide eyes find my mates from across the distance. They've each stopped in their advance, uncertain of how to proceed, even as their sunken eyes burn with murderous rage.

My captor trills in victory, his laughter dark.

"Warriors, you have lost. This ship is now mine. I claim it!"

My skeleton feels like it's being ripped out from the fleshy shell of my body. My head is pounding. All of my senses are focused on my scalp which feels like it's being set on fire. There's so much strain being placed on my spine and neck that I start to choke.

"Release her," Sin'Chila growls. So deep. So dangerously.

My captor hisses a sneer and gives me an agonising shake as though I were nothing more than a child's doll. " *Nej* . She will perish, as will the rest of you. Accept your defeat now and give me the-- *hyuurk!* "

The air whistling is our only warning, coming from somewhere from behind us. The hunter staggers, choking on a noise that takes us all by surprise. Still hanging there, I wriggle and finally manage to get a look at what's happening. A serrated blade is protruding through the male's bicep, clean straight through. The beast howls and releases me fast.

I start to fall but am quickly snatched up by something long and warm, undulating tighter around my hips. The *thing* gathers around me and I glance down to find it's... A tail?

Darvik's tail…

Wait. What?

The intruder beside me lurches to the side, holding his injured limb, giving me a full view of the hunter towering behind him. Tall and broad, Darvik drags me closer, catching my gaze in that single moment. Shaken, I gawp at him, clinging tight to my saviour. Even despite the illumination of the lights, his eyes glow, mismatched and cold with so much fury that my own fear spikes at the sight of it.

Oh my god, he's here... He came back!

"Curse you!" A snarl resonates.

The intruder charges and Darvik whips his tail out, taking me with it. One minute I'm safe, the next I'm sailing through the air with a squeal. Memnis leaps up and catches me, much to my relief. I slam into his arms with an *oomph* and then he gathers me to him, crooning lightly. Tears burn a path down my cheeks and unable to help myself, I let loose a sob.

Darvik dashes forward to meet his opponent, dropping at the last possible second when the male tries to swipe him down. He slides across the ground in one neat motion, grabbing a discarded spear in passing not far away. He leaps up, tossing the weapon to Sin'Chila who moves fast, bringing it down with a sickening *thwack* across the enemy's skull.

And just like that, something spectacular begins to happen. My hunters share a look between one another as they circle around their unknowing prey. Prowling. Taunting. The air goes thick with tension, so much so that I can feel it against my skin like the heat of the sun on a summers day.

From one to the other, they pass the spear between each other, sharing it. Swinging. Slicing. Slashing. Stabbing. To Sin'Chila, to Yaknaur, to Darvik, back again to Sin'Chila again.

Dishing out lethal hits, over and over. Each attack is like a choreographed dance, perfected and skilled, moving at a speed that is just downright impressive.

“Come!” The maddened male bellows, beating at his chest in challenge. He doesn’t know where to look or where the next attack will come from. The brute spins, trying to keep each warrior in his line of sight, unable to follow them. They are too fast, too clever for him. “Come! I will make trophies of your corpses! Who wishes to die first?”

As one unit, they all pile in and the hunter staggers, taken aback. Knives glint and flesh tears, shouts of agony throbbing against my eardrums.

Sin’Chila ends up on the ground and the hunter raises his leg, about to bring his massive foot down onto my mates head. Time seems to slow. Darvik lunges, grabbing at Sin’Chila’s calf with a strong clawed hand. In one swift motion, he drags him out from under his attacker, whose stomp misses by mere inches. The floor bends under its power. Deadly.

Yaknaur comes from the left, landing a spinning kick to an unsuspecting chin. The Yautja’s head snaps to the side and a tusk breaks and flies away.

“Take him down!” Sin’Chila commands.

Everything happens so quickly. Darvik grabs the hunter around the throat with the meaty length of his tail, choking him, dragging him down to his knees. His captive scrambles for freedom but it is too late for him now. Without mercy, Sin’Chila brings the curving tip of his weapon straight down into the hunter’s chest cavity. Blood red eyes shimmer and then darken, their inner light fading. The intruder teeters and then slumps to the ground with a thud. Defeated. Dead.

The entire world seems to stand still right there and then and none of us dare to move. Adrenaline is like a poison in my veins, overwhelming and robbing me of my reasoning. I tremble like a tree in a storm and suck in shuddering breaths as Memnis cuddles me tighter. -- --

“I have you, *Lartee* . Be at ease. You are safe now.”

“How did that *wretch* get in here?” Yaknaur shouts, spitting down to the corpse at his feet.

Sin’Chila straightens, squaring his chin, gaze narrowing. “He must have tampered with our shields.”

Memnis nods in agreement and it all begins to make sense. They’d talked about it earlier; of how there had been issues with the ship. This male must have infiltrated their systems, trying to sneak on board, hoping to overtake it and kill us all.

By himself? I shake my head in disbelief, slowly calming. I didn’t know whether to be impressed or consider the stranger a complete and utter lunatic.

“When I had heard the commotion I had come back as swiftly as I could,” Sin’Chila says, rotating to us. His gaze skims over me. “Is our female safe? Are you hurt?”

“Yes, brother. She is safe,” Memnis answers for me, tightening his arms around my waist and hips.

I lift a hand to my head which is still pounding. I wince as I feel around my scalp, combing my hair, before drawing it away and looking at my fingers, which come away stained lightly with blood.

“I’m OK,” I say too, “just a bit sore. I’m sure it will heal. God, he’d scared the living daylights out of me.”

Someone shifts to my right, carefully drawing closer. I lift my head and my eyes meet Darvik’s. A rush of emotion chokes me and my eyes start to burn again. Sheer gratitude floods through me. I’m so fucking happy to see him right now. All I want to do is run to him and hug him. Hard.

He’d come back and helped us.

Darvik stalks nearer, hesitant. Memnis emits a low rumble and suddenly Yaknaur moves into his path, blocking the way with his hulking size.

“ *You…* ” He snarls, though it seems to lack its usual malice.

My trio all turn towards Darvik, eyeing him like a fox amongst a coop of chickens. Wary and uncertain. Tearing his attention from me, Darvik glares at each of my warriors, growling low.

“Why?” Yaknaur asks then. “Why have you returned? Do you truly wish for death?” His harsh words fall flat, tired and bearing a slight edge of admiration. “Perhaps your hearing has weakened. Did we not make ourselves clear?”

Darvik grunts a scoff, crossing his arms over a scarred chest. “I do not answer to you, nor will I ever. And you assumed much in thinking I had ventured away from this place. I made no such vows or promises.”

Striding closer, Yaknaur squares up to him, pressing in close with a snarl. “You do not belong here, *Vindas.* ” He shoves at him, yet Darvik barely moves. “Nor do we have a need for you. You will always be nothing. You *are* nothing.”

There is something about those words, something deep and far too personal to be considered merely unpleasant. They carry weight and I can see the turmoil within Yaknaur’s glittering glare.

“Yaknaur, that is enough,” I speak up in an attempt to calm them.

Why must they always be at one another’s throats all the time? Couldn’t they just get along? Darvik had helped us, had risked his own safety to fight alongside Yaknaur and his brothers. He had literally just saved our lives. *My* life. Yet Yaknaur was being his usual big-headed self and refusing to acknowledge the fact.

Darvik’s gaze slides back to me and something in me stirs. His monstrous face loses some of its harshness, the silvery scars there prominent.

“It is not for your sake that I am here,” he says to Yaknaur even as his focus remains on me.

The weight of his words settles between us all like a thickening mist, heavy with meaning.

Sin’Chila cocks his head. “You are either incredibly brave or truly unwise, *Vindas*. Though I am not sure which one you may be. Perhaps both.”

Tensions rise, and I half expect another fight to happen at any given moment.

“Leave. Now.” Yaknaur warns, his command resolute.

Darvik *tsks* and begins to stride away from us. Only, he doesn’t leave, I realise with a frown. In fact, he’s going the wrong way entirely, heading instead further into the ship. Perplexed, we watch him saunter away.

Where is he going?

“ *Grekt!* I have had enough of this.” Yaknaur follows after him with hasty strides, shouting after him. “Hunter, do not turn your back on me! Stop where you are!”

Darvik ignores him and with little else to do, the rest of us follow after them. Clinging to Memnis, he carries me to the deck. Once there, we all stop, forming a half-circle around Darvik who rotates to face us once more.

Fists clenched at his sides, he looks to each male, quietly challenging them without a single word needing to be spoken. None of my males move, all three of them are as still as statues. Extremely unsettling.

His eyes find me, silent and probing. He flexes his chest, squaring his shoulders for my perusal.

What is he doing?

Our answer soon comes when he slowly backs away, retreating until he’s all the way inside of his cell. Shadows cast over him, shrouding his face ominously. He lowers to a crouch in his usual corner and we all simply stare at him, nonplussed

Yaknaur breathes from beside us. “What madness is this?”

Sin’Chila lifts a brow to me but I shrug, equally as flummoxed as he is. *Don’t look at me, pal. I haven’t got a clue.*

One thing was clear though. Darvik wasn’t planning on going anywhere anytime soon. His expression alone told us that he meant business; that if any of my males wanted him to leave they would have to drag his ass right out of that cell to do it. What surprised me even more was that my hunters don’t attempt to do so. We’re all uncertain of how to proceed with this weird turn of events. The *vindas* was making himself at home once again, right here, on our ship, and no one knew what to do.

After all, it wasn't like they could lock him up again; he was choosing to be here, had even put himself back into his own prison. And they couldn't remove him by force, not without the risk of another fight between them. We all knew first hand that Darvik was very capable of taking all three of them on by himself. Every time that they'd tried to chase or threaten him away, he'd simply come back or refused to bend to their commands.

In the gloom, Darvik's eyes gleam with cunning. His mouth wriggles into a grimace of a smile, looking rather pleased with himself.

Which left me with only thought remaining…

What were we going to do now?

Chapter 44

They tolerate him; that's all I can really say from this point on. Darvik soon becomes like a mosquito amongst us; hard to get rid of, always there, hanging around even when no one appreciated his presence. Well, that didn't apply to me, as such. I enjoyed having him around, though I'd never admit it aloud. But the others? No. It was obvious they disliked him.

A begrudging kind of mutual peace had settled between my hunters and Darvik, although I don't know why or what that exactly meant. Most of the time they blanked or avoided him as if he were the plague, sometimes even pretending he wasn't there at all. I often found Memnis and Yaknaur looking to their eldest brother for guidance, uncertain of how to deal with the awkward situation. He, on the other hand, simply took the moment as it was; not accepting Darvik but neither discarding him or forcing him to go. Which I didn't fully understand. After all, this was his ship, his crew. He had every right to kick out any he deemed as intruding within his territory. Yet he didn't. And now and then he would look to me, a secretive gleam across his face. Knowing. Questioning. As though waiting for me to do or say something.

I kept to myself, saying nothing, as this rivalry between these males were beyond my calibre. I didn't dare say what I really thought or felt for fear of causing offence or disrupting the tiny nugget of calm that had morphed within our home. Instead, the males around me adjusted and even Darvik himself learned to respect the boundaries of my mates. They did not provide for him; he hunted for his own kills. He was restricted to specific parts of the ship, particularly kept away from our private nesting quarters. He had no right to demand anything. He kept to his cell but was free to leave whenever he pleased; he wasn't a prisoner here. And yet still, he stayed. He followed the rules and asked for nothing, keeping his distance from us all with respect and a small hint of cunning that kept us all on our toes.

One thing that didn't change though, was the ridiculous aggressiveness between Darvik and Yaknaur. They were forever at each other's throats, fighting and butting heads like two disagreeing bulls. Yaknaur, forever being the antagoniser, continued to push at the other male's limits, mocking and gloating at every opportunity. Darvik, being the stubborn ass he was, would contend back with him just as hard.

"Go on, brother," Sin'Chila chirps from a nearby bench, watching the scene before him with growing interest. He leans forward, elbows to his knees as he tries to get a better view of the two males in front of him. "He's growing tired. Focus!"

Yaknaur snorts, throwing him a quick glare before straightening and twirling his spear, returning to his opponent. His body gleams with sweat, muscles flexing as his gaze blazes with eagerness for victory.

I roll my eyes at him. *Here we go again*, the thought surges just as he lunges forward in an attack.

Idly, I chew on a dried piece of meat of some kind. I'm not sure what it is exactly, but it tastes fairly good and salty on my tongue. I shuffle a little, earning a low sigh from Memnis who snakes his arms further around me from behind. His chest presses to my back, my bottom settled neatly into his lap as we both sit on the floor near the wall.

"Don't they have anything else better to do?" I mutter, more to myself than anyone else.

I return my focus to Darvik and Yaknaur as they yet again spar with one another; for what seems like the millionth time in the last couple of days.

For crying out loud, didn't they ever get tired? Couldn't they just get along? I seriously wanted to grab them both and bang their heads together. It was like observing two sibling human children squabbling with each other all day. Memnis and Sin'Chila weren't helping things either. They were constantly egging the pair on, clearly finding each of their fights the highlight of their evenings.

Men. I tut to myself and shake my head.

"Stop strutting and move faster," Memnis teases loudly from behind me, knowing exactly what to say to rile his brother up. "You should have beaten him by now."

I elbow him lightly and smirk over my shoulder. "Behave. Don't encourage him. You know what he's like when he gets grumpy."

Yaknaur flashes him a snarling grin as he prowls past us. "Would you like to come and try for yourself? What's the matter, *little brother.* Feeling too weak?"

Memnis merely rasps a chuckle. "What is this? Do you need some *help*?" That word alone causes Yaknaur to bark at him in offence. "And I here I thought you were a skilled warrior."

If a Yautja could flip the middle finger with a particular look then that was what Yaknaur was doing right now. His scowl was thunderous and Memnis only chortled all the more.

"Cool your temper," Sin'Chila speaks, snapping the male from his seething.

With a growl, Yaknaur dives into the middle of their makeshift arena, aiming for Darvik's head with his spear. Darvik dodges it with ease, striking out with a swift blow of his own, sending my hunter stumbling back. Back and forth they go on like this, both of them powerful and strong, somewhat equally matched, but with Darvik seemingly having the upper hand with his size and the extra assistance of his sly tail.

He whips it out like an alligator, almost sweeping the other towering male from his feet. Seeing the appendage coming, Yaknaur leaps over it with a twist, landing to a crouch a few feet away.

They battle hard, coming together with a crash, straining muscle against muscle. Their panting breaths and vicious snarls echo around the room, eerie and yet strangely beautiful to my ears. There's something animalistic and wild about the noises that they make. Deliciously beastly.

I shiver and something within me shifts, becoming more aware of them. I couldn't help but find them intriguing to watch. Everything about them screamed of maleness, of power, of violence, yet still, the brutal fight kept me transfixed.

As if sensing my very thoughts, Memnis pulls me to him and his broad face burrows into my hair. He purrs low but doesn't speak.

My eyes betray me further, each time returning to Darvik in particular. His beastliness is deadly and graceful all at once. Like Yaknaur, he fights with all he has, not backing down once or admitting defeat. He evades another blow in a blur of motion. His thick locks sway with him, like a waterfall of dark dreadlocks around his overly large head. My eyes trail down his ripped abs and then further towards his narrow hips that disappear beneath his loincloth. The ropey muscles of his thighs strain and I have to mentally slap myself and force my gaze away, realising belatedly that I'm checking him out with my mates sitting nearby in the room with me.

Ugh, I'm such a--

I turn my head and instantly find Sin'Chila scrutinizing me, his face a void. Eerily still. My cheeks fuse with heat and suddenly the floor seems highly interesting to stare at. I've been caught.

"Take him down!" Memnis shouts, so close to my ear that I jolt slightly. And unable to help myself, I lift my head back up to peek at fighting males some more.

Yaknaur's POV

Fury lends him wings as he paces around his opponent, searching, waiting for the opportune moment to strike. Yaknaur snaps his jaws, his claws tightening around his weapon, settling its weight precisely within his grip. Balanced. Ready.

This Yautja, this *outsider* would not best him; he vowed it. The male thought to test him but he would not be made a fool of. No. He would make an example out of this fiend and show him the error of his ways. He was not welcome here and never would be.

That sly *Vindas.* Yaknaur sees the way the other male's gaze lingers on his female, with fire lurking within. A hunger. It was enough to make Yaknaur want to render him to pieces and leave his corpse to rot in the drying, desolate sun. To his displeasure, his chakria's attention is drawn to the other hunter as well; a realisation that makes his belly churn with fire. With envy.

Do not look at him, my female. He is not worthy of you...You are mine.

No one would take her from him. For he was Yaknaur, the great, the strong, the unmoving. He would not be weak.

His own inner thoughts echo and the ghost of a memory rises to the fore, taunting him of a time long since passed…

"*Fight him, Yaknaur! Move faster!" His arma calls from a distance, his tone laced with clear dissatisfaction.*

Desperate, Yaknaur lunges at his brother, Sin'Chila, who reads his oncoming attack with ease. His weight shifts; a great error on his part. Before Yaknaur can correct the mistake, Sin'Chila sweeps his spear out and sends Yaknaur tumbling to the ground with a thud. His oldest kin towers over him in victory and all he can do is lay there, his ego wounded.

"*Come, brother." Sin'Chila holds out his paw in a gesture of peace that Yaknaur did not appreciate.*

Swatting the limb aside, Yaknaur rises to his feet, unaided. "I do not need your help!"

Before he can say more, his arma is there, tall and powerful, glaring down at him. The face scowling back at him is not unlike that of his own, familiar and yet a stranger.

"*You…" His father's claws flare as he spits his next venomous words. "Must you forever be a disappointment to me?"*

Yaknaur remains wisely silent, not daring to speak, as is respectful to one of higher rank and authority. He had heard these words many times before, so often that he could hear them even at times when he slept. A mocking reminder of his failures.

"*Time and again you fail me, Yaknaur," his arma hisses. His disgust was so strong Yaknaur could almost taste it. "Why can you not be more like your brother?" He gestures behind him with a sweep towards Sin'Chila who waits there, silently watching them.*

Yaknaur flinches, his inner pain real. There was no contending for his father's pride, Sin'Chila had always been his favourite. Steeling his features, Yaknaur bows quietly in a gesture of acceptance.

"*I will do better," he vows.*

"*Better?" The larger male sneers, his tone harsh. "I do not want empty words, young one. You have a choice. You either take and conquer, or you fall. Be strong or be weak. Which will it be?"*

When Yaknaur does not respond, his arma spins away with a snap of his jaws. "Pitiful!"

The giant Yautja moves back to his position at the edge of the fighting circle and with a loud clap, he motions towards them both.

"*Begin! Again! I will make a warrior out of you yet, my son. Have no doubt about that."*

Sin'Chila steps forward, lowering to a crouch, ready for their next battle. Only his eyes are uncertain, shrouding some of his reluctance, but not all. Yaknaur sees his pity there too and it is enough to fill him with a scorching fury all over again.

Shoulders set, weapon gripped tight once more, Yaknaur swipes at the blood dripping from his chin. Seething.

His brother may be larger than him but that would soon change. Yaknaur pledged to himself that he would show them all of what he was capable of, and even more besides. He would become strong; the better of them all. The most powerful.

Snapped from his haze, Yaknaur's mouth spreads wide into a roar and without hesitation he pushes forward, lunging for Darvik once more, taunted by the echoing reminder of his *arma's* loathing for him.

He would not be beaten! He would not be weak!

A well-placed strike knocks the shuddering spear from Darvik's grip and it clatters to the ground noisily, sliding as it goes. Within moments, the male is on his back joining it. Preening, my Yaknaur strides - not towards his fallen enemy - but to me. He grins at me, splaying his mandibles, chest broadening with pride. His low purr sends molten liquid pooling directly to my core. There's something about the way he's showing off and posturing that I find both amusing and decidedly attractive. His confidence beams and I smile up at him from the safety of Memnis' embrace.

"Are you impressed, my female?" He coos softly.

I don't get the opportunity to answer as my focus drops to follow his clawed hand as it travels down his massive chest in a seductive and intentional caress. My mouth turns dry suddenly. Idly, he hooks a claw into the line of his loincloth, tugging it down a little. Teasing. Giving me a tiny glimpse of the throbbing bulge hidden there beneath the crude fabric. My breath catches, my pulse roaring to life.

Holy Jesus Christ on a cracker... *that is so sexy.*

His pleased trill tells me all I need to know. He knows I'm admiring him. He can see my arousal blooming along with the pink flush across my face that I had no doubt would be there. My body burns up for him and his mouth flares to taste the air, to sample my lust for him.

Memnis nuzzles and nips my nape from behind, forcing a shudder down my length. My nipples bead into hardened peaks. My--

“Behind you!” A familiar voice calls and suddenly a thick length of a tail wraps itself around Yaknaur’s neck.

He chokes, startled. I gasp with him, equally surprised. Darvik squeezes him and then pulls him away from us, sending him flying across the room with great force.

Stunned for a beat, Yaknaur pushes himself up enough to glower at the other male, fury replacing that smug look he’d only be wearing moments ago.

“You dare to play cheap tricks on me, *Vindas*?”

Darvik chuckles lowly, doing some chest-puffing of his own as he slowly paces past us. “Tis not trickery if you are foolish enough to turn your back onto your enemy. Unless he lies dead at your feet, never underestimate a foe. It could cost you your life.”

Sin’Chila hums, still observing them closely. He leans back in his seat, crossing his arms with thought. “Indeed. Such true words. You speak wisely.”

Mood darkening, Yaknaur rises to his feet. Sin’Chila says something else to him but I don’t quite catch the exchange as my focus shifts and becomes stolen the minute Darvik’s huge self pivots towards us.

His eyes lock onto mine and like the true predator he is, he prowls forward, advancing closer. Tail swishing like a cat, he pauses in front of us. My neck cranes back in order to hold his mismatched gaze, which seems to pin me in place, making my insides lurch with some unknown warmth.

He strains, muscles dancing in a display of strength. His chest expands, glittering with a sheen of sweat, and the width of his massive shoulders only seem to widen further. Mimicking Yaknaur, he subtly makes a show of reaching for his loincloth and I can’t help but look down at him. At *it*. At the solid heap of meaty maleness that’s barely begin concealed from sight.

Oh my...

Ashamed of myself, my eyes flicker upwards again, only to find him slyly smiling at me. His tail – a treacherous, needy creature – slithers forward. The barbed tip barely breezes across my ankle when Memnis suddenly yanks me to him. His hold jerks me awake and the harsh hiss he emits nearly rattles my eardrums. The low growl that follows rumbles against my back. A threat. A warning.

“Keep your distance.” His usually soft tone is filled with menace.

Feigning nonchalance, Darvik meets my stare one last time before walking away, obviously choosing to behave and obey.

... For now.

Chapter 45

The following day…

--

“Come… Hunt with us.”

I almost choke on the berries I’m eating when I heard Sin’Chila say those words to Darvik. Sat in my corner, I swivel myself around on my ass to face them with an expression of outright shock.

Did I just hear him correctly? Is my baby addled brain playing tricks on me? Surely I was imagining things. Did he really just ask him to go hunting with them? Holy macaroni.

Yaknaur advances, striding away from his position at a nearby station. His face mirrors mine, only there is a muted fury there as well. His eyes blaze brightly, flickering between the figure of his brother and the huge male lounging within his cell.

Everyone in the room shifts. Awkward and unsettled. Memnis casts me a wary look and I can tell he’s thinking the exact same thing as I am. I shrug at him subtly in an *‘I have no idea what is happening’* kind of way. The tension throughout the deck is like a living breathing thing, weaving around us all, straining and tight, causing a ripple of unease to creep down my back.

Sin’Chila’s expression gives nothing away, his attention fixed upon Darvik as he stands over him, shrouding him within the length of his massive shadow.

“Well?” His tone is patient, incredibly cool.

“You wish for me to join you?” Darvik asks with some uncertainty.

“Is that wise?” I say, even though I’m not entirely sure who I am speaking to. All of them, maybe.

I can’t help my unease. Sin’Chila, Yaknaur and Darvik, hunting together? Oh, hell no. The idea alone made me want to laugh and cry at the same time. Was Sin’Chila being serious? It was the equivalent of inviting three angry, hungry lions to a children’s tea party and not expecting there to be chaos or casualties. Sheer madness.

“Brother, no.” Yaknaur glides to his kins side. Insistent. “He is not one of us! How can you welcome him into our group? He will be of no use and will only get in our way, we do not need him. He should--”

Sin’Chila lifts an arm, motioning for silence. Yaknaur stills, bowing his head in respect. Reticent.

“Am I the leader of this clan or am I not?” Sin’Chila asks with a firm tone before returning to Darvik, mandibles wriggling as he asks the male again. “Will you come with us or not? Memnis will stay here with our female. But you…” He points down to Darvik. “I will have no idle males on my vessel. If you are to be here then you shall do as the others do and earn your place.”

I sit there, observing the exchange warily, fiddling with the edge of my makeshift tunic. For a brief moment, I think that Darvik is about to tell Sin’Chila to – in milder, Yautja terms - to go screw himself. But he doesn’t. Uncurling from his spot, he rises to his feet and peruses each of us in turn. Thoughtful. His luminous gaze settles on me and lingers, something warming the depths of his mismatched eyes before he finally decides to answer my mate.

“Very well. I shall follow you.”

Yaknaur snarls and paces away in a bid to hide his displeasure. It’s clear he doesn’t want the other hunter going along with them but refuses to voice his view on things. My brows dip, my chest aching for him a little as I see his frustration brew further and I have the overwhelming urge to hug him.

“Good,” Sin’Chila says with finality, nodding. He then addresses Yaknaur as well. “Gather all that you may need. We shall begin soon.”

I sit there, gawping at them, not really believing that this was even happening. I sigh and suddenly a warm body settles itself next to mine. I peek and flash Memnis a smile who has come to join me amongst the curled up hounds. I pet at one gently and the whitened membrane of its eyelid slides open sideways before closing again, returning to slumber.

“I hope they know what they’re doing,” I say to Memnis, watching as the others start to don their helmets and chest armour.

Memnis grunts, saying nothing, but his tone suggests that he agrees with my sentiment. Worry curls and I try to force it back. I could only pray that they all came back, together, uninjured and all in one piece. Although, knowing Yaknaur and Darvik as I did…

That was probably like asking for a miracle.

Yaknaur’s POV

“Tired?”

“No.”

“You are not needed here, *Vindas*. You should go back.”

“No.”

“Aren’t you afraid?”

“No.”

“*No*? Is that all you have to say? Can your pitiful mind not conjure any other words? I thought you were an intelligent being.”

For most of the day, he gives the other male no reprieve. Yaknaur’s mocking taunts seem to fall onto deaf ears and the brute he despises refuses to retaliate; much to his growing ire.

With careful movements, the three of them stalk through the treeline, leaping with ease from one shadowed trunk to another. Vibrant leaves shudder and move in an unseen wind, hiding them from sight as they lingered. Waiting. Watching.

Since the sun had risen high into the endless sky, their journey had been in vain and without success. They had found and killed nothing. At least, not yet. Despite this failing, Yaknaur’s focus was entirely upon the Vindas, taking much joy in tormenting him.

Grekt, how he loathed him. The male thought himself untouchable now. As one with them. Oh, how very mistaken he was. It would only be a matter of time before Yaknaur would make his move, but for now he had to practice patience. He would wait and--

“Look.” Sin’Chila suddenly chirps, landing with a soundless thud beside him within the foliage. “Up ahead.” He points with his spear subtly, hunkering low in a signal that potential prey was nearby.

The air stirs and without looking, Yaknaur can sense the Vindas at his other side, joining them in the gloom.

“Keep your distance.” A rumble echoes up his throat in warning and the other male shifts the slightest away, giving some more much-needed space between them.

“Enough, Yaknaur,” his brother growls and Yaknaur sneers before sliding his focus back towards the task at hand.

There, not so far in the distance, moves a small gathering of *Naja.* Like a drifting cloud of grey and white, they shift nearer as one unit. Plentiful and thriving. Yaknaur takes in each beast, calculating, picking out areas of weakness amongst them. The herd are scattered, each creature grazing idly. Their four-legged hoofed feet make only the smallest of sounds as they cross from one patch of greenery to another. Huge horns curve from their heads, giving them a lethal appearance. But these creatures were not a challenge for someone as skilled as he. The *naja*, he knew, were careless and mindless at the best of times. This would be an easy hunt.

“Do not think that we intend to share our kill with you,” he hisses through his tusk to Darvik. “I do not share what is mine. Not *ever*.” He adds with meaning and his thoughts fly to that of his female who would be waiting for their swift return.

No. He would not share anything with the *Vindas*. Not his food. Not his home. And certainly not his female. She was theirs and theirs alone. Try as he might, the male would not get anywhere near her. Of that, he vowed.

When no response comes, Yaknaur's snaps lowly, echoing his own earlier words. "There is no need for you to be here."

Why did the male not listen and heed his warnings? Perhaps he was just as mindless as the *naja* before them. How pitiful!

A light fist to his chest snaps him from tormenting and he spins to his brother with a smug grin. Sin'Chila in turn shakes his head, scowling with disapproval.

Stop. He hears the warning even though his kin does not speak.

"You know it is true, Sin'Chila," Yaknaur continues with a whisper. "Why do you continue to play with this fool?"

"You talk too much..." Darvik suddenly pipes up, driving Yaknaur's glare back to him in a trice. "...and you make too much noise. You bark like a hound constantly and seem to have little self-control, which in turn makes you more vulnerable than you think." He flashes a brief but serious glance towards Sin'Chila. "I pity you."

Seething now, Yaknaur leans in with a clack of his mouth. "Spare me of your preachings. What do you know of such things, hmm? At least I have a clan. My brothers are my shield; our bond and loyalty steadfast. Where is *your* clan, Vindas? You have none! Who is the weak one now?"

He notices the way Darvik shifts, turning away. Encouraged as his discomfort, Yaknaur continues. "Do not think me blind. I know of what games you play and let me say this; my *chakria* will never become one with you. You are wasting your puny efforts in vain. My body is strong and my aim is sure. She does not need you."

Darvik's mismatched eyes flash, coming back to him.

Ah, yes. There it is, Yaknaur considers him slyly. *Anger. At last.* If in doubt, mention the female. She is his weakness.

Yaknaur's voice drops, turning molten. "*My* female enjoys my care greatly. I know she does. She eats my food and touches me in a way that makes my body ache and burn for her…" When he doesn't get the response he wants, he adds with sly purpose. "Oh, and I make her burn too, Vindas. Did you see it? I am certain you did. Trembling. Whining. Falling apart in our embraces." He arches back, eyelids closing with a croon as though recalling the feel of her. "And her tiny little *snat* always becomes so tight and slick when I--"

Darvik finally snaps, snarling a curse at him.

"That is enough, Yaknaur," Sin'Chila cuts in sharply, shoving at his brother's shoulder. "You have gone too far."

Yaknaur shrugs. Nonchalant. “I am merely showing him his place.”

“Which is?” Darvik asks drolly.

“Not here… and not with us.”

The tension between them all rises higher and Yaknaur’s fights back a grin. Despite the great burning desire to destroy his adversary, he could not help but find their little game somewhat amusing. This pathetic hunter was keeping him entertained if nothing else.

“You speak of your mate poorly,” Darvik chides.

“Not at all,” Yaknaur scoffs. “I respect my female highly, for she is perfect in every way. Strong and wise. She needs only capable males to tend to her needs.”

“Oh? Then why did she choose you?”

Yaknaur stiffens, mouth spreading wide as he tries to think of something else to say back, only for his mind to draw blank. Nothing emerges and the Vindas shoots him a satisfied grin in his small victory.

“Hush!” Sin’Chila hisses then, gesturing to space below their hiding place. “Here they come.”

The leaves rustle and the tree beneath them shudders as if in complaint at their combined burdensome weights. There, just beyond the gathering foliage, Yaknaur sees that the herd has wandered closer towards them, almost directly below their feet. The air stills, charged suddenly with the need for silence. For stillness. Each male holds his breath in awareness that the tiniest of sounds would likely cause them to dash away in fright.

A moment passes as the herd gathers further into view. Each *Naja* beast treads cautiously over the rocks and fallen branches. The females are sleek and plentiful, some with younglings at their sides. There was but only one male; the bull, who was the tallest of them all, hovering at their centre, watchful and protective of his harem. They would have to move carefully with this one. For this male was large and heavy in size, with curling tusks arching up from beneath its jaw and an impressive set of intricate but lethal-looking horns splaying high from its head.

“Wait for my command,” Sin’Chila says, so lowly that only the three of them could hear.

The beasts come closer and, as one, they begin to raise their spears, taking aim.

“Go for the smaller of the females, the one with the silver markings. Do you see her? She walks alone and protects no young.”

“Yes,” Yaknaur rumbles, his warriors' blood soaring through him like a scorching fire. Thrilling. “I see her.”

“Wait…”

His arm trembles yet he does as bade. This kill would be his, he would not miss. He never missed.

Their target stops merely a short distance away, oblivious to being watched.

“Now!” The command comes.

In a blur of motion, Yaknaur sends his spear flying down through the branches, the movement so fierce that the air whistles. Sin’Chila’s and then the Vindas’ follows a beat after, but it is Yaknaur’s strike that takes down the *Naja*. Swift and sure.

The rest of the herd bleats in surprise, their hooves frantic and loud as they all scatter away in every direction.

A roar of victory rips through Yaknaur’s throat and he leaps down to collect his fallen prize. He lands with a thud to the mossy ground and then strides to his kill, beating at his chest with pride.

“Yes! Behold! For I am Yaknaur! The great! The mighty!”

He yanks the still shuddering spear free and golden blood sprays, coating his powerful thighs. Pleased, he turns to face the other two Yautja who remain within the darkness of the trees.

Arms spread wide he gestures to them. “My skills are unmatched, are they not?”

Even from this distance, he sees his brother shake his head, unimpressed. Darvik remains at his side, solemn and as still a shadow.

Yaknaur opens his mouth to speak again, only to hear the sound of a sharp crack from somewhere behind him. The bushes part. Something rushes at him, galloping hard, gaining speed. He has no time to react. Locks whipping, he lurches around, chest pounding with alarm to see the huge male *Naja* charging at him. The bull is fast, far too quick for him. He falters and surges back a few steps.

Out of nowhere, another spear comes slamming down, impaling the *Naja* right through its chest. Mid-charge, the bull crumples to the side in a deadened heap, so dangerously close that Yaknaur feels its flank brush against his calf.

His shock fades as the other two hunters leap down from their spot to join him and Yaknaur turns, ready to thank his brother for his aid… Only to find Sin’Chila is still carrying his weapon at his side.

Slowly, his expression darkens, sliding to the *Vindas* who smirks at him, empty-handed, and looking only far too pleased with himself.

“You…” Yaknaur starts to growl, annoyed and yet confused.

Why? Yaknaur could not begin to understand it. Why had the *Vindas* defended him? It would have been only too easy to allow the bull to trample him underfoot. Yet he hadn’t. He’d

interfered and taken it down without hesitation. He had hit his target, sure and precise, even though it had been in full speed of flight.

Impressive.

“That is what you get for not paying attention,” his brother teases, striding past them both to examine their fallen conquest.

Still scowling, Yaknaur huffs. He would not thank the other hunter. He owed him nothing.

Moving to stand beside Sin’Chila, their eyes meet and his kins gaze glitters with poorly hidden amusement.

“He’s good.”

Yaknaur’s chest rumbles and begrudgingly he nods, admitting with quiet annoyance.

“Indeed… ‘twas a good throw.”

The day passes quietly and before I know it the others are returning back to the ship again. From my position within Memnis’ lap, I see Sin’Chila flash me a subtle but cunning smile. His molten eyes are alive with some sort of awareness that has me lifting a brow at him. Perplexed and curious.

“Oh, hey.” I offer him a small wave. “How did it go?”

He says nothing as he lugs the dead heavy animal hanging his shoulder away and into another room. Probably to skin it, I realise with a slight turn of my stomach.

Darvik enters next, coolly, his face a mask. He looks to me as well, his perusal fiery as he settles himself back into the corner of his cage.

Yaknaur trails in last and as soon as I see him I know something is amiss. Tension clings to him and instantly I can sense he’s troubled by something. Dried blood is splattered across his legs, his greyish skin damp and gleaming from exertion, even though he doesn’t appear particularly out of breath.

“Yaknaur?” I say his name and he comes to me.

Without pausing, he snags me up from Memnis’ hold, who grunts a little in disapproval but allows him the privilege. I squeak, surprised as strong arms pull me tight. Yaknaur burrows his monstrous face into my hair, breathing me deep with a hiss.

I soothingly stroke his broad back and he purrs, rubbing into me like a contented cat.

Why is he acting so strangely?

Over his shoulder, I peek at Sin'Chila who has returned, this time empty-handed. I cock my head, silently seeking answers, but Sin'Chila merely shakes his head. *Don't ask,* his expression seems to say to me.

Taking the hint, I try to relax and continue to cuddle into my mate.

"Come, my female. I have missed you. I want you all to myself for a while," Yaknaur says, his tone brooding and unhappy, like that of a sulking child.

With that, he starts to carry me away and out of the room, away from the others, who simply regard us idly. Unfazed.

"Oh.. erm. Ok." My confusion deepens but I don't deny him.

Without a word, he hefts me tighter to him. Possessively.

Ok then, is all I can think to myself.

Clearly, things hadn't gone well today.

Chapter 46

The night draws in and Yaknaur does not leave my side for the rest of the day. His clinginess is endearing but worrying. Though he doesn't say what is wrong, I have a feeling it's something to do with Darvik and their day out together hunting. We spend most of our time in the nest, cuddling and with him doting on me like a puppy. He braids my hair, feeds and nuzzles into me, his embrace protective and also somewhat desperate. It's almost like he's expecting something or someone to come along and try to take me from him. And no matter how much I try and reassure him he only clings to me more.

His earlier words come to me again, making my heart ache...

"*You will always be mine," Yaknaur had said whilst I had sat snuggled within his lap. "Won't you, my chakria?"*

I'd frowned, surprised at the uncertainty I'd heard in his voice. I'd peered back at him over my shoulder, perplexed and concerned.

'*What a silly thing to ask', I had thought at the time.*

"*Of course I will," I'd answered. "Why do you ask me this? Is something wrong?"*

No answer had come, which had only made me want to fathom further as to what was wrong with him today. This wasn't like him at all. He had become so withdrawn, so quiet and not at all like his usual prideful self.

The heat of him at my back is comforting and sleepily I sink into him. Still slumbering, he unconsciously pulls me closer and rumbles something, not quite stirring awake. Blinking my eyes open, I peer into the gloom of the room. Idly, I lift a hand to rub at my cheek which has gone a bit numb from laying on the same side for too long. I stretch a little, my toes curling as I gradually find myself awake.

Peering back and over Yaknaur's massive shape, I see that my other mates lay on the other side of him. Sin'Chila faces away from us, whilst Memnis is spread out comfortably near his feet. Their light snores tell me they're asleep too and I carefully lay back down so as not to make the leaves beneath me rustle too much. Lost in thought, I lay there, waiting for sleep to come to me again, slightly surprised I'd even woken up at all. Usually, I slept like the dead and it often took something akin to an earthquake to wake me.

And something *had* woken me, I was certain of it. A stirring. A noise. A sensation. Although I wasn't entirely sure of what it had been. I yawn and stare around the space chamber, trying to figure out what it was.

Nothing is there. Only the darkness.

So then… why did I feel so on edge all of sudden? Alert. As if… being *watched.*

I cast one last look around, taking in every shadow and shape, only to then pause upon the large figure that stood hovering in the doorway. My heart leaps faster as the male prowls forward, revealing himself.

Darvik.

I suck in a harsh breath with both relief and surprise. What is he doing in here?

His eyes glow within the dimness; one like the moon, beautiful and silvery-white. The other stark yellow and as vivid as the sun. Unhurried, he advances, never once removing his focus from my face. He doesn't even acknowledge the male at my back or the other two resting nearby. Brazen.

I open my mouth, about to whisper a warning to him. He knows he's not supposed to be in here. If the others were to wake and find him here right now they'd likely thrash his hide. Or worse.

My words falter, refusing to emerge as his ravenous look all but pins me into place, glittering with intent and longing.

Longing.

I swallow thickly and something in me stirs to awareness. Without preamble, he climbs down and lowers himself into our nest. Joining us. I gawp at him, stunned as he lounges on one side, facing towards me. The long length of his reptilian tail shudders as if with eagerness before he forces it to curl around his own leg, keeping it contained.

He doesn't touch me at all. The distance between us is respectful and plenty. But even still…

He shouldn't be here.

Darvik's POV

He stares at the female, watching as she arches into her mate, her alien eyes fluttering open to wakefulness as though already sensing his nearness. In silence, he admires the length of her small body. Need strikes at him hard, stealing his reasoning.

Where once he had considered her alien and strange, now everything about her appealed to him. From the smooth glow of her *hooman* skin to the flaming waterfall of her hair, even to the stubs of her tiny toes. Greedily, his stare consumes her. The mere sight of her made him

ache. Even now, he could still recall the embrace of her little arms as he had carried her against his breast.

He stills as she wakes further, seeing him. Her eyes flare wide with alarm.

Unable to control the urge, Darvik goes to her and does the unthinkable. He steps into their nest, lowering close enough so he can get a full view of her. A moment; that is all he promises himself. Yet the longer he lingers the harder it becomes to leave her side.

Scorching heat crawls through his groin as she peers at him, taking him in with equal measure. His *cros* twitches, throbbing against his cloth. Responding to her nearness.

Settling, his hungry regard feasts on her some more, a low rumble of contentment rolling through him. He should leave. Now. It was imperative that he did so; for his own safety and that of the females. Yet he is reluctant.

And so, he hesitates, waiting a while longer...

This is such a bad idea, the worrying thought hits as I lay there, trying to decide what to do.

Should I wake the others? Should I tell him to leave? I had no idea how to deal with this situation.

For what seems like an age, Darvik and I stare at one another. With my head pillowed by Yaknaur's bicep, I inhale deeply, seeking to calm my nerves. The musky scent of them both curls around me, male and wild. Decidedly delicious.

Woah… Where had that thought come from? I chastise myself and then look down.

A gasp escapes me when I notice the rigid bulge of Darvik's crotch tenting his loincloth. The small scrap of fabric is barely keeping it concealed from sight and I shiver, licking at my lips in unknowing appreciation. My attraction to him surges against my better judgement. My body betrays me in a beat as warm wetness seeps between my thighs. Aching and empty.

I hear him hiss in a breath, mandibles flaring wide, smelling the air. Tasting it.

I squirm, whispering his name in a harsh rasp.

"Darvik."

I realise my mistake as soon as Yaknaur begins to move. I yip, panic shooting through me as my hunter's arms draw me further to him, stirring awake.

"What's this?" His low purr turns lethal and I feel, rather than see, his attention move past me, towards the male that had come to invade our sanctuary.

Oh shit. This isn't good.

I wriggle and attempt to sit up, my fear climbing.

Please don't start fighting. Not here. Not now.

Guilt soon follows as I mentally berate myself for saying nothing and allowing this to happen. I knew without a doubt that Yaknaur would be furious. But what I didn't expect was for him to yank me back down again, stilling my movements with the fixed lock of his muscled arm around my waist.

He seems to expand against me, his body thickening with threat. My already diminutive size gets swallowed up by his.

"Yaknaur… wait..." I whisper, keeping my voice low in the hope that our commotion doesn't wake the others up as well.

"I have to admire your courage, *Vindas*," Yaknaur rumbles with some bite. "There are not many who would dare to sneak into another's nest. Did you come here to try and steal her from us? Were you--"

He stops speaking and suddenly leans down, inhaling against the side of my throat with a hum. His breath blasts across the skin there, causing goosebumps to rise. Delicious and yet frightening all at once.

"You…" He growls to me, both in dawning realisation and with an edge of eagerness. "I can smell your need, my female."

Oops….

Hot mortification blooms across my face. He doesn't sound angry, per se. More like intrigued. Perhaps even enthusiastic.

"I…" Trapped to him, I try to think of something to say, seeking an excuse. "It's nothing. I'm just… I..."

"Hush."

He nips at my shoulder, punishing, but not hard enough to break the skin there. Instead of feeling afraid, my desire spikes higher. At my gasp, Yaknaur's hips thrust forward and the swollen rod of his erection presses against my ass.

His focus returns to Darvik. All the while his clawed hand slides up the length of my body, sweeping my hips in a casual caress. Darvik follows his every movement, lingering on my breasts which peak beneath my clothing.

Oh god...

"Time and time again we have warned you, *cretin.* Yet you never seem to listen nor learn." Yaknaur's tone turns devious, dark with intent. "But you and I both know that there is more

than one way to tame an unruly pup. Yes? I know of what will make you submit and obey."

Without warning, Yaknaur suddenly grips at the fabric of my tunic, pulling hard. It tears with ease like paper, jolting me enough that I yelp at his roughness.

"Yaknaur!"

Seconds later, my coverings are gone and I am left bared and naked within the circle of his arms. The cold air hits me but that is not the reason why I shiver next.

Yaknaur rumbles lowly, as does Darvik, their heady growls echoing together like the rolling of thunder. Yaknaur rubs against my ass again as though unable to help himself. His claws glided down to my breasts, tweaking and pinching at each pebbled nipple in turn. He moves lower, hovering over the slope of my pregnant belly possessively, before sneaking further towards the V of my sex.

I arch with a gasp, chewing on my lip to stifle the sound. His fingers skim my folds, searching. My legs part of their own accord as more embarrassment scorches through me.

Yaknaur purrs again. "Your need is strong tonight. You are soaked for me." His touch finds my clit and I moan, grinding back as he toys with it in a way that sends my senses reeling. "Come. Let us show him once and for all as to whom you belong to. Open for me. Let me have you. For I am hungry for you, my female. *Always*."

"Wait…" I start, but my words go unheard.

Still facing towards Darvik, Yaknaur's arm seats itself under my breasts, caging me to him. He leaves my pussy, reaching down to tear at his cloth, freeing himself. His strong forearm then scoops under my knee, hooking my leg up and drawing it out wide, spreading me open for all to see. His cock slips forward and the bulging tip slips through my sensitive folds, nestling against my entrance. He notches himself there. Bracing. Waiting purposefully.

My hooded eyes flutter open; I'm not even sure when I'd closed them. So engrossed in the feel of my mate, I'd almost forgotten all about Darvik who is still quietly observing us from afar. Our gazes meet from across the space at the exact same time that Yaknaur breeches into my clenching channel, sinking in so deep that my breath stalls in my lungs.

"Ah--!" I slap a hand to my mouth, stifling my cry of pleasure.

Yaknaur's flesh tears through mine, leaving a trail of fire and aching need in its wake, stretched to the point of near pain.

He's so fucking big… and I love it.

"Yes, that's it," Yaknaur grunts into my nape. "Ah, you take me so well... Such a good female."

He pulls out, only to grind back in again straight to the hilt. His balls slap into my ass as he starts to ride into me steadily, making my head loll back into his shoulder. Held tight, I have no choice but to accept everything he gives to me. His cock is swollen and hard like steel

wrapped in velvet, deliciously curved in a way that hits my sweet spot with each exquisite thrust.

I shudder hard and a whine climbs up my throat even as I try to hold it back.

Memnis and Sin'Chila are still asleep somewhere nearby, completely oblivious to what is happening.

And as for Darvik…

Sweet Jesus, he hasn't even blinked yet. His focus is riveted on us, unapologetically watching me getting fucked by my hunter. With my leg forced wider, he gets an even better view of our joined bodies, seeing everything. Missing nothing.

"She feels divine," Yaknaur drawls, sliding in again, sitting there for a beat simply to feel my quivering flesh pulsating around him. I hear his tusks clack, his voice becoming strained. "Shall I describe her to you, *Vindas*?"

"Don't…" I breathe even though a part of me is finding this whole situation incredibly erotic. It's so wrong, yet so (–).

Goading, Yaknaur speaks again. "She is all heat and slickness." He groans and his pace picks up a notch, making my womb ache and clench. "Tight... *So very tight*… She clings to me so fiercely. I want nothing more than to stay buried in her little *snat* for all time." His words falter, breaking away into a roughened snarl.

He's getting close. He's going to cum soon. I can feel it coming.

Done with his tormenting, Yaknaur's claws dig in as he slams me back onto him with vigour. My breasts bounce and Darvik ogles them hungrily. My lust is making me a shameless, wanton thing, reluctant to ask my mate to stop. Because… the truth was...

I didn't want him to stop.

I needed this.

Look away. I all but plead silently with the male in front of me. *Please, look away.*

This wasn't the first time that Darvik had witnessed my hunters taking me, yet I doubted it was something I would ever quickly get used to. My human pride told me I was disgusting for enjoying this. It was wrong. I was--

Subtle movements force me to look down and I choke on a gasp to see that Darvik has his hand wrapped around his now uncovered cock. My mouth turns dry as I stare at the thickness of it.

Oh my god… He's huge.

The purpled tip gleams, trickling with some of his leaking seed and I lick at my lips, trying to imagine what he would taste like.

His hips grind forward, sending his cock penetrating out the other side of his fist. Lost in the moment, he mimics Yaknaur's movements, thrusting in time with him as though trying to simulate the sensation of being the one who is fucking me. He snarls low and I whimper in response; a female cry of pleasure to match his male one.

"Dirty, needy male. I knew it. I knew you would weaken," Yaknaur hisses at him, though there is no hatred in his tone. In fact, he seems rather satisfied with the other hunter's lack of control. "Come. Tell me. Do you ache, *Vindas*? Does this please you? Look at us." He then whispers to me, pounding into me without relent. "His *cros* is swollen for you, my female. He yearns for you but he cannot have you. He will *never* have you. You are mine!"

I can't take it anymore. I need to cum. Now.

I snake my arm free and find my clit, uncaring as to who sees and rub at it frantically. Sensing my desperation, Yaknaur grinds in deeper, finding that secret place that finally sends me hurtling over the edge. My climax rips through me and I have to bite Yaknaur's arm to muffle my scream.

Both males growl in union, low and pleased.

"That's it, female. Slake your need all over my flesh. Drench me with your cream. Let me have it!"

I shudder, my pussy walls clamping down like a vice over and over around his cock. Helpless.

Yaknaur sinks in one last time and follows me soon after into bliss. His tusks find the back of my neck, clamping down as I feel him fill my cunt with his hot seed.

Darvik hisses. I blink through the fogginess in time to see his cock twitching and jerking within his fist. Creamy cum squirts from the tip in ropey rivulets, drenching his abs and chest with his release. More of it dribbles down to the leaves beneath him and I stare transfixed as it continues to pour like a seemingly never-ending river.

Holy fuck… that's hot.

Gradually, we all calm and settle into stillness. Yaknaur lowers my leg but doesn't slip himself free. Instead, he stays sheathed within me and a possessive growl emerges.

"*Mine."*

I choke on a sob as so many emotions rush at me from nowhere. Satisfaction. Joy. Shame. Unease. My entire body shakes still, feeling raw and delightfully used.

As if sensing my turmoil, both hunters trill to me, cooing gently. Yaknaur combs at my hair with his mandibles and Darvik simply nods to me, his gaze soft and glowing within the gloom.

"Should you ever touch that which is mine, *Vindas*, know that I will end your miserable existence faster than you can blink," Yaknaur says, even as it lacks some of its usual bite.

Darvik scoffs, unfazed by the threat. “You can try.”

“Do not tempt me...” Comes the sleepy reply. “...for I will not hesitate next time.”

“Yes. So you keep saying.”

Yaknaur grunts, which sounds oddly a bit like a chuckle. Despite their back and forth bantering, he hasn’t told Darvik to get out yet. I honestly don’t know what to make of that fact. Or of them in general.

“Tomorrow, *Vindas*. Tomorrow your head is mine… Be ready.”

Another grunt follows.

I feel Yaknaur relax, drifting once more into sleep. His warmth blankets me, soothing and lulling. Exhaustion calls and my eyes begin to droop.

I manage to look to Darvik one last time, idly noting that his cock lies flaccid against his hip, his torso still glistening with his release.

My brows furrow as anxiety surges. I can only imagine what he’s thinking right now. Of what he thinks of me.

My cheeks burn under his stare, and then, as if reading my very thoughts, he speaks...

“Sleep, *Taz’arin.*” He croons lightly. “Sleep… I will watch over you.”

Surrendering, I submit, and the last thing I feel is the length of his massive tail it weaves itself around my thigh.

And just like that, I drift off into the realm of dreams.

Chapter 47

This is such a bad idea, I think as I stand there, peering out at the vast jungle around me. But oh well...

Call me stupid, but the water lapping about my naked waist and legs feels divine right now. Cool, it ripples around me, reflecting the brightness of the sun overhead. I scoop up some of its crystalline wonderfulness and send it cascading over my shoulder, and then another against my face, relishing in the moment. With a small laugh of pleasure, I hold my nose and then dunk entirely underneath its gentle flow and leap back up again, sucking in a breath. When I re-emerge, I wipe the moisture from my cheeks, shoving away my sopping wet hair to listen carefully.

All is quiet. All is still and serene.

The small lagoon I am currently in seems safe enough. The water is clear, giving me a good glimpse of what lingers down below near my feet. Turquoise sand sifts through my toes and a school of tiny shimmering fish shoots past nearby, iridescent in the light. The crowd of trees around me sway in an unseen wind, their colourful leaves and branches moving in a dazzling kaleidoscopic display. Various creatures hoot and chirp from their hiding places; a melody of wilderness that I found so peaceful and beautiful to hear.

A constant thrum has me ducking now and then, peeking through the foliage to peer at the familiar shape of our ship which sits there in the distance. The ramp is still lowered and so far no one has realised I am gone. At least, not yet. After endless days of Yakanur and Darvik constantly at each other's throats, I had finally taken the risk to slip out and escape for a while. I'd known about this little secret spot but had never dared to come here, especially not alone and without one of my hunters. But, I guess desperate times called for desperate measures, and such. Their constant squabbling was giving me a headache and the need for some peace and 'me time' had sounded too much of a temptation to ignore.

Yep. This was definitely a bad idea… But what would it hurt? Right? Hopefully, by the time I was done here, I could quickly slip back inside and no one would have even noticed I'd been gone.

Smiling, I bask in the rays of the sun. I flip onto my back, allowing the surface of the water to carry me and float there for a time, enjoying the view of the ever-shifting sky. So wonderful. I could practically feel the delicious vitamin D soaking in through my pores by the boatload.

Ah, this is nice. This is exactly what I'd needed. Some quiet. Some nature. To be alone for a while.

After some time, I sit up again and sigh, knowing that soon I would have to return to the ship. I peek once more through the trees for its massive shape.

Yep. Still there. There's nothing out of the ordinary. Everything is fine.

In all honesty, I half expected to see one of my males stomping over to give me the greatest verbal ass-whooping of the century. I did not doubt that they would probably nag me to death and keep me under ship-arrest for the rest of my human life.

I sigh again and start reluctantly towards the shore whilst ringing out the length of my hair. I turn towards where I had left my tunic under a particularly vibrant orange and purple tree that all but shadowed the lagoon like a willow tree on steroids.

As I wander beneath it, something plops down from above, hitting the water with a splash, causing droplets to fly into my face. A creak follows, along with a low rumbling purr that has me freezing like a statue.

Fear trickles down my spine and I wade back a step. Uneasy. My attention shoots up, seeking the creature who I now knew to be watching me. My throat tightens, a small frightened sound nearly emerging until I see the hulking figure crouched there amongst the branches. With ease, he hovers there, massive and copper-skinned, with only a loincloth over his slender hips. His monstrous face and mismatched eyes scowl at me in disapproval.

I suck in a breath, my hand going to my chest in alarm. "Jesus Chri--!" I cut off the curse and shake my head at him. "Darvik… You scared the hell out of me... You shouldn't creep up on people like that. I thought you were something else."

He doesn't speak at first. That molten gaze of his sweeps over me slowly, lingering, and it's then that I remember I am openly stood there and completely naked.

I cross my arms over my chest in a bid to cover my breasts. I stumble back, deeper into the water again so that it at least comes to my belly button, hiding my crotch as well.

"You are right to be afraid, female," Darvik trills, peering carefully in each direction. Wary and guarding. A spear rests lazily in his grip. "There are many dangers within these trees. You know this. It is too dangerous for you to be here." He then adds pointedly. "Your males will not be pleased."

I shiver a tad, squirming under his strict reproach.

I shrug, feigning nonchalance. "It's not a big deal... So, relax. I'm fine."

His head tilts and darkened locks sway with the motion. I can tell by that tiny gesture alone that he doesn't agree with me.

"Oh, come on." I point to the gleaming silvery alien spaceship waiting just beyond the bushes. "The ship is right there and I'm still within the range of our shields. There's nothing to worry about."

Wow, I wasn't very good at making excuses. Not at all.

Darvik grunts. "You are foolish to have come here." With a snap of his mandibles, Darvik rises to a stand, the branches beneath him bowing. His mottled hand gestures, commanding for me to go to him. "Come. We shall return at once."

Part of me knew he was right; it was dangerous to be out here by myself. But then I remind myself as to why I'd escaped out here to begin with and all of my frustrations from the last couple of days creeps back in with a vengeance. The arguing. The fighting. The constant back and forth that sometimes had me wanting to bash my head open with a rock.

"Yeah, well..." I drawl the words coolly before turning and giving him my back. "I'm not finished yet, and I'm done with all of you guys telling me what to do."

I start to make a display of washing myself, rubbing at my arms and ignoring his low growls from behind me.

"Female…"

I don't answer and the growls turn into an outright snarl.

"Female!"

"That's not my name," I toss in reply. "Stop calling me *female,* you're starting to sound like Yaknaur."

Just when I think he's taken the hint and left, a loud splash sounds and I whip around, startled. Before me now, Darvik rises from the water like some kind of mythological god in an epic movie scene. Droplets dribble down his body like tiny glistening diamonds. My mouth turns dry as I eye his powerful shoulders and the muscled abs that looked like you could grate cheese on them. Rippling thighs thicker than even my own waist.

He prowls forward, his gaze searing with determination and intent. "We go back *now*."

My shock drains away leaving annoyance in its wake. My chin sets, jutting at him with challenge.

"And I said '*not yet'*."

I already had three possessive Yautja's bossing me around and Darvik sure as hell wasn't getting the privilege of becoming the fourth. My pregnant and hormonal pride was urging me to rebel against him.

"Enough," he says, "do not be so stubborn."

I snort at that, lifting a brow. The comment was ironic coming from him of all people; the walking, breathing embodiment of stubbornness.

"Stop trying to command me then," I retort.

For a moment we stand there, staring at one another, neither of us backing down. I notice the frustration and ire glimmering within his twin coloured eyes and I find myself battling a smirk. I had to admit it; I enjoyed defying him like this. It made up for all those times when he'd lugged me over his back, carrying me about like a sack of potatoes. Ah yes. A little bit of payback was sweet for the soul.

Something stirs, passing between us, as thick and as charged as an electric current. Awareness nudges at me as he shifts his stance and my instincts rear, telling me that he's about to try and do something. His pupils narrow, fixating like a wolf's when on the hunt for prey.

"Don't bother," I warn, already bracing myself.

"Return to the ship."

"No."

He doesn't give me any more warnings. He lunges and I stagger away, almost tripping over my own feet. I dodge to the side as fast as the water will allow me. Something heavy and long sweeps past my legs, nearly catching me in its serpentine hold.

His tail.

I spin, heart pounding, to glare at him again. "What do you think you're doing?"

Cunning flashes across his face, ruthless and yet playful, making the scars there bend and dance with his languid smile. "If you will not obey then you give me no choice but to tame you, female."

I roll my eyes at him. Seriously? Now he really did sound like Yaknaur.

"I'm not afraid of you," I state, even as I tremble a little at how close he's getting.

"I would not wish you to be," he replies smoothly, purring low. "But nor does that mean I am not a threat."

"What does that mean? That makes no sense."

I knew for a fact that he wouldn't hurt me. He'd proven that point time and again. So why was he trying to make it out like he was some kind of danger I had to be wary of? I wasn't scared of him; only uncertain of how he made me doubt myself. Of how he made me feel whenever he was nearby. His eyes… They did things to me that I didn't dare to admit to anyone. Such beautiful, vibrant, brilliant things that seemed to devour me whole.

"I am not one of your males, *Taz'arin*," he says, stalking forward once more. He steps to the side at the last moment, circling around me. Playing with me. "Because of your carelessness, you are now at my mercy. It would be only too easy to steal you away from all that you know and cherish… Are you afraid now?"

"You're bluffing," I say coolly. "You wouldn't do that," I continue, becoming more sure as I pondered the idea. "You've already had multiple chances to do that, and yet, here we are." I narrow my gaze at him. "I think you're just trying to make me feel bad for coming out here without someone to watch over me. And yes, I know, it was stupid. I'll admit it."

I choose my next words carefully, my irritation softening as he pauses at my side, making no attempt to grab for me again, even though we both knew that he could if he wanted to.

"Besides, I'm not alone, am I? *You* are here. I think I'm pretty safe."

Darvik closes the gap between us and the musky scent of him wraps around my senses like a blanket. My treacherous gaze falls, sliding over his powerful chest and I snap to just as quickly, forcing it back up again. He catches the look and his mobile jaws quiver, spreading into a self-assured grin.

"You would rely on me to protect you, little flame?" That rolling purr smooths over my ears like silk.

I shrug, suddenly having lost my will to speak. His proximity is affecting me too strongly. I should have known this would happen. I should have stayed at home and saved myself the hassle of having to deal with this moment. With him.

Lies... So many lies.

I jar as realisation strikes at me, hard like a fist. My own thoughts shame me. For deep down, I'd known Darvik would have come to find me here. The damned male stalked me everywhere I went without fail. When I moved, he moved. My own personal giant shadow.

I glance around the small lagoon and shifting trees once more, troubled and angry at myself. I knew I should have asked one of my hunters to come with me, but I hadn't. I had come alone, secretly knowing that Darvik would have followed me.

I wince, lurching away from him as though slapped. How could I think of such things when I had three devoted males who would worry for me as soon as they'd realised I was missing from them?

"*Taz'arin*?" Darvik's soft croon forces me to snap back to him again. As though sensing my inner turmoil, he reaches out to touch me.

"Why did you come back?" I ask a bit too sharply, annoyed at him for his never-ending persistence, and also at myself for being so weak-minded. "You should have stayed away. Sin'Chila gave you your freedom…" I sounded like a bitch even to my own ears and it only added to my dropping mood.

"You know why," he states calmly.

His warm gaze trails over my body in a greedy and also tender fashion. Belatedly, I realise that my arms have dropped and my breasts are now out on display again. I no longer cared at this point. Goosebumps rise across my skin as I let him look his fill. The memories of a few nights ago spring to the fore, unbidden; the night Yaknaur had taken me in our nest. Of Darvik giving himself pleasure as he watched us. Scorching heat drops into my core, one that I could not force away no matter how much I tried. The more I fought it the more it consumed me.

Shaking myself, sadness stains my voice. "There is nothing for you here, Darvik."

I can't give you what you need. Why couldn't he see that this was never going to end well? I hated having to reject him, but what else was I supposed to do? I didn't know what to do.

"There is *you*," comes his trilled reply. So light and so quiet that I almost miss it.

My heart flutters, aching for him.

"Please, don't…" I groan and rub at my brow. "You're making this too difficult to deal with. I —ahh!"

Strong arms heft me up suddenly and I yelp, taken by surprise. With startling ease, he flings me over his shoulder and I dangle there for a beat, stunned.

"What the-- what are you doing?!" I finally snap, writhing like a snake in his hold. "Put me down!"

He starts to walk, taking me with him, uncaring to my shouts.

"Are you finished with your little display?" He chuckles, clearly amused. "Deny me as you will, I have no intentions of leaving your side, so stop your wriggling and behave."

My hair drapes across my face and blood rushes into my head. The ground below sways as I stare at it and his huge alien webbed feet with a scowl. I'm half tempted to try and bite him but then I pause, taking in the nice view of his partially covered muscled ass.

Stop it, Charlotte. Just stop it.

I growl then, struggling some more. "All right! Fine! I'll walk home. I swear I'll walk! So just put me down, Ok?"

He grunts. "No. You had your chance. Now you are mine to carry, and carry you I shall."

I can tell by his smug tone that he's enjoying this way too much.

"Damn it, Darvik!" I beat at his back and he hardly seems to feel it. The flesh there is solid like it's made out of granite. "You pigheaded, irritating, son of a--"

I move too suddenly and start to slip. My insides jump into my throat as I feel myself beginning to fall. I squeal just as he catches me and rights me into position again with a low growl in warning.

He draws to abrupt stillness and I blink, confused as to what he's going to do now. A heady trill rumbles through him, so deeply that I feel its vibrations through my hip. His face turns and one of his tusks grazes against the curve of my backside. His grip shifts, making me very aware of where his hand is. It's clasping the inside of my thigh, directly below my pussy…

My very *bared* and *naked* pussy.

Oh god...

I hear him inhale sharply. Sniffing. A hot breath skims against the flesh there.

"Darvik," I whisper his name and the sound echoes between us.

Surely he wouldn't…

His hold tightens for a second, trembling slightly, before sliding lower and away from temptation. Saying nothing more, he hefts me higher and restarts his journey towards the ship. Still shaken, I dangle there, my body still dripping heavily with water.

His feet thud onto the ramp as he starts to ascend it. He only makes it halfway before more footsteps come rushing towards us, thundering loud and fast. I sense rather than see my other hunters approaching and I can only begin to imagine what they're thinking at seeing me like this.

"What is this?!" Yaknaur bellows. "Explain yourself, *cretin!*"

I sigh. *Great.* There's going to be another fight soon, I could feel it coming. All of the inner peace I'd gathered throughout this morning dies in an instant.

Here we go again.

Darvik stills as they draw near. "I found her by the waters… bathing." He says, addressing Sin'Chila directly, I assumed.

All eyes fall to me still slung over his shoulder and I lurch upright, trying to peer at them through the damp curtain of my hair. All three of them stand there like towering sentinels. Yaknaur and Memnis hover at their leader's side, frowning deeply. Sin'Chila crosses his sinewy arms, clearly equally as unhappy.

"You found her?" He asks Darvik, raising a strong and hairless brow.

"I did." I feel his nod and the broadening of his stance as if he's proud of himself.

"Then you have done well, *Vindas*."

"Indeed," Yaknaur quietly adds. All of his earlier aggression suddenly gone. He sounds almost… *thankful.* "Who knows what could have happened if you had not been there to watch her."

I choke on a sound, absolutely stunned. Did Yaknaur really just praise Darvik for bringing me home? *Holy Jesus Christ on a cracker*. Was he ill? What on earth was happening here?

I poke a finger into Darvik's side. "Hey! Who died and made you chief? Since when did you become a Judas? I thought you liked me?"

He offers me a snort of a laugh. His hand subtly sneaks along the back of my thigh in a sweeping caress and I stiffen. Despite the broadcasted display, none of my males make any comment on it.

"What is a *yoodas*?"

I sigh. "He's a character in a story. A traitor… like you."

Carefully, he lowers me to my feet and I'm turned just as Yaknaur moves to stand over me. Considering his size, my head has to crane slightly to look at his face. His perusal of my naked form is intense, searching me for any sign of injuries, ensuring that I am unharmed.

"This male betrayed you?" He asks with some bite. "Where can I find this *hooman,* and what is he to you?" His random jealousy almost makes me want to laugh. "He shall taste the edge of my blade."

I pull a face. Exasperated. "Seriously?"

Despite all their combined hunky, alien sexiness, sometimes they acted like absolute Neanderthals. Trying to explain human things and phrases to them often felt like I was trying to teach algebra to a chimpanzee.

"You're missing the point," I mutter blandly.

All of them circle in closer, creating a barrier of male flesh around me. Protective. I retreat a step, only to bump into Darvik who still hovers behind me. The heat of his torso warms the length of my back.

Sin'Chila reaches forward then, clasping my chin and bringing my focus up to him. With firmness, he speaks. "You have displeased me greatly, *Chakria*. You know our rules. No one is to leave the ship without my allowing it, least of all *you*. You are far too vulnerable and precious. What if something had happened to you?"

I chew on my lip, feeling very much like a child being chastised by a disapproving parent. Part of me wanted to argue back like one, yet I chose wisely and remained silent, begrudgingly seeing his point. I had acted carelessly today and I should have known better.

"Fine. Fair enough... I'm sorry." It's all I say and, satisfied, Sin'Chila releases me.

My morning was ruined now anyway. I was cranky. Hungry. The headache that had been steadily blooming through my head now felt like a steel band squeezing at my skull without mercy.

Annoyed, I shrug Darvik's hand away from my shoulder and squeeze my way through them all, heading up the ramp and into the spacecraft I called home. Their conjoined quietness is unnerving and I feel each of their gazes following after me, burning against my back.

I refuse to glance back. I was so done with Yautja males for today. All I'd wanted was a bit of space and quiet. Was that too much to ask?

So then why did I feel so bad about it all? Guilt continues to nibble at my conscience.

Ugh. These damned hormones.

They sucked.

Chapter 48

I lay there for a long while, restless and tossing about in my cosy bed. Slept evades me, yet again – a problem that is of regular occurrence lately – and I find myself staring into the gloom of our chamber for what feels like an eternity. The nest is warm. The leaves were soft and like a motherly embrace around my body. But it doesn't help me to feel any better. The longer I stay there the more it begins to sink in as to how much of a stupid idiot I've been. I was taking my frustrations out on my Yautja, struggling to keep control over my chaotic mind and emotions. I had ignored their wishes and had ventured outside when I'd known very well it was a dangerous thing to do. I'd lashed out when the truth was that they'd only wanted to ensure my safety, which only made my guilt only more prominent.

Laid on my side, I sigh, caressing my gradually forming belly. Being pregnant was hell at times. I'd kinda known that it had a tendency to make a woman feel a bit unlike her usual self, but this was too much for me to handle. My hormones were all over the place. I ached a lot; especially my back and breasts. Sometimes I would wake up in the middle of the night drenched from unpleasant night sweats. Most of the time I either felt terribly hungry or horribly sick. And don't even get me started on the excessive peeing; my bladder was constantly complaining at me, needing to be emptied. Overall, every daily life was becoming a bit of a pain. My body had a mind of its own and was surely trying to drive me mad.

"I can't wait to see you, little man," I whisper to the babe that wasn't yet here, still caressing my bump lovingly. "No offence, but I think by the time you're ready to come out and meet the rest of the world I'm going to be a train wreck." I poke at him playfully, even as nothing shifts or stirs from within.

I could only pray and hope that the others had patience with me. I was bound to be a grouchy cow for while and I didn't want them to take it the wrong way. And I certainly didn't want them to start feeling any regret and resentment towards me; it was the one thing that I feared the most.

I loved them. I would always love them and nothing in the world would change that.

Tears come and I groan, wiping at my eyes. Breathe, Charlotte. Just breathe. Everything is going to be all right. This is all part of the process. It's natural.

Something cracks lightly, breaking through the quietness. The foliage and bedding move as a body slowly lowers down behind me, making his presence known. Brawny thick arms join mine around my middle, carefully drawing me tight into a solid chest. The hunter is too large to be Memnis, I realise, and his purr is not as harsh as Yaknaur's. I inhale, smelling his unique scent of wilderness and earth.

"Sin'Chila?" I whisper his name and I hear his chirp of confirmation.

He burrows his monstrous face into the back of my nape, his giant frame all but swarming around my smaller one, surrounding it like a fortress. His jaws comb at my locks, emitting a slight hiss which causes me to shiver. It was such an animalistic sound. Inhuman. Yet I felt its

deep contentedness all the way down to my toes. Warmth floods me; with need for him, with love for him.

"Speak to me, *Chakria*," he croons, never once stopping his ministrations in my hair. "I sense your turmoil even though you do not speak the words. You have been behaving strangely. Tell me of what ails you." He trails off and that niggling edge of shame returns.

I smile a little, once again floored by his devotion. Even after everything I'd done today, he was still eager to take care of me. It made me feel loved… And it also made me feel undeserving.

"Tell me," he urges again, insistent.

I chew on my lip and then roll over to him. The branches crunch as I snuggle into him. I wrap my arms around his thick waist and plant my cheek against his powerful chest. When I struggle to meet his gaze, he slides a clawed hand under my chin, forcing me to look at him. His eerie yellow eyes slip over my face, taking it in. Searching.

"I've been a bit of a bitch today, haven't I?" I state glumly, not really needing an answer.

"What is this word?"

I sigh, trying to find a way to explain it to him. "It means… '*dishonourably*', I guess... I have been selfish."

I turn away and burrow into him again, hiding my face before saying, "I just want you to understand that I don't mean to be. I have been struggling lately and the baby is--"

"The youngling troubles you?" He cuts in, his grip on me tightening in concern. "Is he well? Is there pain?"

I rise to my elbow and shake my head, meeting his eyes again.

"Oh, no, no. Not like that," I rush to say whilst rubbing at my bump. He reaches out, his black-tipped clawed hand joining mine. "I don't really know how to explain it other than that I can feel myself changing, Sin'Chila."

The leathery slope of his brow deepens further. "I do not understand."

I shrug a shoulder. Idly, my fingers wander up to his chest to fiddle with a lock of his ropey hair, testing its roughened texture. He allows me to do so; his trust in me is absolute. It was well known amongst their kind that touching of another's hair was either a gesture of a strong bond or of great insult. I was always glad to know he approved me of such a privilege. Such a small gift that spoke volumes of what he felt for me.

"Sometimes I wake up and feel sadness for no reason. Sometimes I start to cry even when I know I don't have anything to cry about." I flush a little, becoming embarrassed for revealing such things to him, wondering if he understood any of it. "It's strange and confusing."

His other massive paw touches my back, swiping down it in a gentle rub. He finds a particular spot and, like a cat, I press into him as the contact firms, enjoying the way it lessens the ache that had been forming there.

"Mmm." I close my eyes for a beat with relief. "That feels so nice." I then return my focus to him with a small but regretful smile. "I'm sorry for what I did this morning. It was wrong of me to leave the ship without telling you. I know I made you worry."

Sin'Chila nods, accepting my words. "Indeed. Your safety and the safety of our youngling is imperative, my *chakria.* You know this." He leans forward then and gives me a light but punishing nip to my shoulder. I could still sense some of his displeasure, but his manner told me he was willing to be forgiving. It was enough. He was here and that was all the mattered.

Lowering back down, I half-lay across his sprawled out form. My head presses to his chest, hearing and feeling the steady pounding of his heart against my ear. He embraces me closer, chirping and trilling with his pleasure.

A long drawn out silence stretches between us. Pensive but calm. At least, that is until he speaks again…

"The *Vindas* did well today…"

I stiffen against him, suddenly awake from my languid bliss.

"He has proven himself quite useful, as of late. Although I do not appreciate his presence here, I was grateful for his guarding of you." He nudges into the top of my locks again. "He brought you back to us, safe and unharmed. For that, I am willing to forgive him for some of his previous trespasses."

"Yeah… I guess so…" I didn't know what else to say on the matter. The last thing I wanted to do right now was talk about Darvik. Every time his name was mentioned unease rolled through me like a darkening cloud before a storm.

"It would seem that you are turning out to be the most difficult female to keep, my *chakria*." Sin'Chila grunts a teasing chuckle. Playful. "What are we going to do with you?"

I huff in feigned offence. "That's grand coming from you... *Mr Bossy.*"

"That may be so, but every command I make is with purpose and meaning. You cannot endanger yourself like this again, not when there is another life within you to risk as well."

"I know. I hear you. As I've said... it won't happen again."

I pull back and lean up, planting a kiss to the edge of his jaw. His mandibles flare, fluttering as his eyes blaze like rippling flames at me. For a long time, we simply lay against each other, basking in each other's closeness. There was nothing better than a good cuddle. And my Yautja – despite their brutishness – were actually very good at it. My lips quirk as the thought registers. It was so nice to finally--

"Do you want him?"

The quietness that had once been pleasant swiftly turns heavy. My eyes crack open and dryness forms in my throat. Anxiety is a ball in my gut.

Oh no. Not this topic. Anything but this.

I yawn, feigning nonchalance. "Hmm? What do you mean?"

Sin'Chila grunts, chiding. "You know very well to whom I refer to. Do not play ignorant, little one."

I wince at his tone, desperately trying to find something to say. I didn't want to talk about this. Not here. Not now. Especially not with him. I didn't want to acknowledge anything I was feeling towards the other hunter; they were unnecessary and disloyal to those who already loved me.

I hesitate, hoping he'd drop the conversation, but instead he nudges at me, waiting for my answer.

I lick at my lips, nervous. "I didn't ask for him to be here. He came and stayed of his own accord, Sin'Chila," I say perhaps a bit too waspishly.

My frustrations are open and vulnerable for all to see and my reply is a pitiful attempt at shirking responsibility for the events that had been happening between us all. I pet Sin'Chila's bicep, refusing to meet his gaze once more for fear of what I would see there. I didn't want him to worry about this. Whether I liked Darvik or not, I would remain true to my trio, even if it cost me my sanity to do so.

When he speaks next there is no accusation there, only steadiness.

"That does not answer my question. Why do you hide your thoughts from me?"

Because they are wrong, I think to myself with some sadness… *And because they might hurt you.*

My mind wanders, memories rising up without warning. I could still remember the very first time I'd met Darvik back on the human's ship after they'd taken me. How frightening he'd been. How dangerous. Caged and as furious as a lion, being tormented by his captors. I felt no regret for freeing him that day, even though he had taken me with him and tried to use me. Over time, slowly, that harshened male had morphed into someone else entirely; a creature not quite unlike that of my own hunter's. Brave and tender. Protective. That tiny shred of vulnerability I always saw in him made it impossible for me not to feel a connection to him. Part of me had wanted to hate him for worming his way into our lives like this, for not leaving when he should have. Yet I couldn't bring myself to do it. Because I knew, that on that day Sin'Chila had offered Darvik his freedom, I had been devastated, thinking I'd lost him forever. A part of me had grieved.

I lift a hand to my face, rubbing at it in a bid to rid myself of his lingering image. Sin'Chila reaches to take it into his much larger one and somehow we end up lacing fingers. An eerily familiar and very human sign of affection.

My emotions choke me and I whisper to him. "I love you."

It's all I can offer right now. I admit to nothing even though I sense that Sin'Chila already sees through my very soul like a wizard. He knows almost all there is to know about me, even the things I didn't.

"I see," he rumbles. "I believe I am beginning to understand…"

I still, his ominous words sliding through me, sending goosebumps prickling down my spine.

"Understand what?" What did he mean by that?

"It is nothing. Think no more on it… All will be well." His tone firms and, just like that, the conversation is closed. He tugs me closer, stopping anything else I wish to say from emerging. His rolling trills hum and vibrate through me, calming, even though I can't ignore the eerie feeling of foreboding that whispers through my mind. A fear for the future and what it would eventually lead to; helpless against it like a battered flag, flapping and hanging by a thread in a raging storm.

Burying the feeling deep, I clasp my male tighter, wondering as to what would become of us all...

Only time would tell.

Chapter 49

"What is it that you do, my *Lartee*? I am intrigued."

"Hang on, give me a minute..."

With my tongue stuck out in intense concentration, I finish my task of drawing the near-straight lines about the large piece of slate balanced awkwardly across my knees. My fingers cramp, struggling to control the small but sharp stone in my hand as I scrape each line into being. Once done, I then shade each alternating square, forming a familiar grid that hopefully represented a fairly decent impression of a chessboard. Or in my case… a checkers board.

I wipe my chalky fingertips clean and then peer at my creation. It wasn't perfect, but it'd do, for now. I then reach down for the chunky necklaces I had gathered from the room full of human things. The beads were just the right size and rounded shape to be of use, and so, using my teeth, I snap the elastic, sending them scattering. I count out needed amounts of each colour of the blue and red stones and place them into position.

I place the last piece down and then clap my hands, giving them a wave as though I'd just made the best thing since sliced bread.

"Ta-da!"

Kneeling beside me, Memnis peers down at my work and then slowly looks to me. Clueless. "What is it?"

"It's a game," I reply, carefully lifting the somewhat heavy slate and carrying it towards a table where it could sit and be played in comfort.

I head towards a couple of empty crates, intending to use them as make-shift stools and I smile when Memnis helps me to carry them into position.

"We call it checkers, or draughts. One person has control of this side of the board…" I point, explaining it further to him. "And the other player gets this side. You take it in turns to move these tokens and the idea is that you have to jump over the other person's colours to collect them all. Like so…" I move some of the beads around, trying to show him what I meant. "Whoever gets the most wins the game...Wanna play?"

Memnis cocks a scaly grey brow, obviously still not fully understanding the idea of it. I grin, indicating for him to take a seat on one of the boxes. Doing as bade, he lowers his huge size onto it and its wooden structure creaks ominously under his muscular weight.

I was bored; there was no point in lying to myself about it. For the last few days, I'd been steadily losing my mind from lack of entertainment, dying internally for something interesting or productive to do. And this was all my baby-addled brain could come up with.

But, hey, why not. I shrug to myself. It was better than nothing, I guess.

Memnis' inclines his head. "I do not understand." He lifts a crimson bead between his giant fingers, making it appear ridiculously tiny in comparison. "I have no need for these rocks. Why would I need to gather them?"

I take it from him with a sigh and place it back to where I'd originally put it. "It's just for fun. You don't actually get to keep them."

"For fun?" He echoes the foreign word and I can't help but smile, endeared by his child-like curiosity.

I perch onto the opposite crate. "Here, let me show you…"

And like that, I start to teach him the rules of the game. Time flies, passing in a blur, and for what seems like hours we sit there, taking it in turns to move the stones, capturing each one whenever we got the opportunity. Memnis, much to my surprise, was a fast learner and was soon thrashing me with ease. To my annoyance, he ends up with nearly all of my coloured stones gathered on his side of the table.

"Yeah…" I finally mumble, rubbing at my brow as a headache forms there from thinking too hard. "Note to self, remind me not to show you anything again. You're good at this." Almost too good, I wanted to add. His poker face was lethal, revealing nothing.

I reach to take my turn, only for a hulking presence to appear at my side. His broad shadow casts across us as his voice rumbles from over my shoulder.

"Not that one… Lower."

Crooking a brow, I peer back to find Yaknaur there. Bent close now, he eyes the board with a keen intensity. Sin'Chila idly moves behind him, taking a seat at one of the nearby controls, watching us in silent interest.

I blink, taken aback, especially considering I hadn't even heard them come into the room.

"How long have you been there?" I couldn't help but ask aloud.

Yaknaur's jaw flash into a playful grin. "Long enough to know that you are losing, my *chakria*." His expression darkens, sliding towards his younger sibling with displeasure. "You should allow our female to win, brother. Shame on you."

I wave a hand dismissively to his comment. "No, no. Not at all. He's doing great, but I think I still have a chance to--"

Memnis sweeps the board then, taking all my last remaining tokens, winning the game.

"Oh, wait," I mumble drolly. "… never mind."

"*Tarr darrr,*" he mimics my earlier words.

I laugh and the sound rings out around the area, causing them all to chuckle with me. For a menacing giant of a Yautja, he was just too damned cute.

"Let's go again," I say, beginning to rearrange everything again.

Memnis nods.

"No," Yaknaur's interjects with a grunt.

Suddenly, I am lifted up into strong arms. Without strain, Yaknaur takes my place on the crate and lowers me down into his lap.

"Let me try," he drawls with growing enthusiasm. "Consider yourself challenged, little brother. I shall not lose. I never lose."

"All right." I nestle back into him and let him take over.

I teach him as we go and, like his brother, he follows my instructions obediently. He hesitates at times, seeking my advice here and there when needed. Memnis goads him from across the table, knowing full well that Yaknaur was competitive as heck to the bone. They taunt each other without mercy and I glance at Sin'Chila, shaking my head at their antics.

Something moves in the doorway then and a familiar towering figure slips silently into the room to join us.

I look up and Darvik's eyes instantly meet mine, holding them. His jaws wriggle and his gaze sharpens as they take note of my position on Yaknaur's knee. His stare is so intense that I end up turning away, just in time as Yaknaur bellows in victory.

"See! Behold!" His strong arms snag tighter around my middle in excitement. "No one can defeat me. Not in strength, nor in the power of the mind." He chirps into my hair, rubbing there affectionately. "I like this game very much, my female. Teach me more!"

I hear Sin'Chila scoff and Yaknaur's head snaps to him in a trice. "Shall you be next, my brother? Come. Test me if you dare. I am eager to take you all on one by one."

"*Nej*," Sin'Chila replies in disinterest. "I am in no mood for such things."

Yaknaur snorts, about to throw out a retort when his gaze finds Darvik hovering near the entrance. His arm flies out, pointing with a little too much enthusiasm to be considered friendly.

"You..." He beckons to the other male with a growl, his fist slamming down with a thud. "Come! Sit. I shall challenge you next!"

We all seem to hold our breath, wondering as to how Darvik will respond. Memnis rises, sliding stealthily away from the table and my mouth parts in surprise when Darvik prowls forward, slipping into the now empty seat before us. His eyes ripple with purpose, yet he says nothing. Yaknaur hisses and the sound stirs against my hair.

"Let us stake a boon between us," Darvik says then just as Yaknaur bends forward to begin their game. "I wish to declare a prize."

"A prize?" Comes the wary echo back.

Darvik nods, choosing his next words in caution. "If you win I vow to give you whatever it is that you wish from me. No matter what it may be, by my oath, I will obey."

That gets the other hunter's attention instantly. Yaknaur's tilts his head. "Anything? Truly?"

"Yes."

"Even if my request is that you leave this ship and never return?"

Ugh. Not this. *Again.* I stiffen and glance at Sin'Chila, but he doesn't speak up to interfere.

Darvik seeks my gaze before answering. "I agree."

Yaknaur emits a smug and low chuckle, flexing against me in eagerness.

"However, If *I* am the victor…" Darvik adds then, smoothly "I require something in return."

Yaknaur growls, as does Memnis faintly, and we all have a niggling idea of what he's about to ask for.

Tightening his arms around me, Yaknaur scoffs. "It does not matter what you want. You will never have it, nor will you succeed. Why try? You might as well walk away now and leave your warriors' dignity intact."

"Yes or no, hunter," Darvik replies, coolly. Unmoving. " 'Tis a simple question." Ignoring Yaknaur's snarl, he finally states, "what I want is your female…" My heart jumps into my throat as he strokes the surface of his lap. "*Here.* I wish for her to sit with me."

"No!" It is snapped.

"No?"

Darvik's idle tone tells me that he is taunting the other hunter, trying to play on his ego in order to get him to succumb. Clever, but probably an unwise thing to do against someone like Yaknaur. After all, the guy was more likely to rip off your head than admit to being bested by you.

To my surprise, Yaknaur turns to me with a frown and actually seems to be considering the idea. The decision troubles him; which kinda makes me want to laugh a little. I mean, it wasn't like it was a life or death situation, right? They were both making this out to be such a big deal.

"Guys..." I pipe up, patting at Yaknaur's powerful bicep. "Calm down. It's just a game."

I start to rise, hoping to take remove myself from the situation so I could no longer be used as a trophy. I don't get very far though, as Yaknaur's holds me fast, pulling me back down to him.

"Very well... I accept."

What the...

I choke on a noise, shocked. In fact, we all appear pretty much taken aback by his declaration. Seeing my response, he purrs, rubbing my cheek with his roughened one.

"Fear not, my female. I will do whatever it may takes to ensure you remain at my side. Come. Help me. We will crush him together."

I roll my eyes at him, knowing full well that I don't really get much of a choice in the matter.

Focussed, I take my time, genuinely trying to help him. I point out better ways to go across the board and which moves to take that would put him into a greater advantage. All the while, Darvik sits there, as cool and as patient as a panther lounging in the sun. Confident and sure. Like he already knows that he's won.

Of their own accord, my eyes slip down his frame, eyeing the coppery-gold hue of his mottled skin which catches the light, almost gleaming with iridescence. His broad shoulders are relaxed. His hair like stiffened ropey pipes. The trunks of his forearms are impressive, weaved with veins and muscle, as was his chest which flexes under my appraisal.

I blink, realising belatedly that I've been staring at him for a while. I snap to, far too late it seems, as Yaknaur moves his token the wrong way, leaving him vulnerable. I suck in a breath as Darvik casually leans forward, jumping over my hunter's last remaining pieces, sweeping them up one by one until only his colour remained.

"Oh…" I gawp, speechless as the air rakes thickly with tension.

None of us has the chance to react as something whips forward then, snagging around my waist in a python-like grip. I yelp as I'm yanked from my mates embrace and suddenly pulled into another's. Heart pounding, I stumble awkwardly onto Darvik's lap, all but dragged there by the will of his bulky tail. My hands slam into his chest, unbalanced from the sudden motion. Crooning, he wastes no time and burrows into my neck, inhaling with a trill. In a rush, I am swamped by his heat and the muscular temple that was his body.

"Darvik!" I gasp, amazed at his daring. Especially considering all of my mates were sitting nearby and watching, already growling low in threat.

Damn, the dude had balls of steel. For sure.

Memnis shifts on his feet, as though preparing to leap to my aid. Sin'Chila, on the other hand, merely crosses his arms. Unfazed.

Yaknaur sneers and shoots up from his seat, reaching forward in a bid to snatch me back to him.

"Do you wish to win her back?" Darvik asks swiftly and Yaknaur stalls in his approach. All of his simmering anger fades until only confusion remains in its stead.

Darvik had planned this all out far too well, I realised. None of this had anything to do with playing checkers. All Darvik had wanted was to get me close to him, and was succeeding fabulously. And now it was just the case of killing some time and enjoying his moment.

With a sweep, Darvik motions towards the slate. "Here is your chance to redeem yourself. Why not take her from me?… *if you can.*"

"You think to toy with me, *Vindas?*" Yaknaur growls, his face sharpening. "You may try but I see your trickery, and I will not bow to it, or you."

In a wild rush, he resets the board, putting each stone back into a starting position. All the while, Darvik is breathing hotly against my nape. His chest is braced against my back, hot like a furnace.

This next round turns out to be the longest one yet, seemingly going on forever to the point where I start to become restless. Especially when Darvik's plate-sized hand starts to stroke lightly across the curve of my hip. I squirm, only to gasp when I feel the hardening bulge of his erection rubbing into my backside.

"Be still, *Taz'arin*," Darvik bends to whisper against my ear. "Your little body tempts me too greatly and your male is watching us…"

I snap my gaze up to see that what he says is true. Perched in his seat, Sin'Chila observes us from a distance. Watchful. He doesn't seem to be annoyed. In fact, one could almost say he looks amused, his eyes dancing with some inner light I could not fathom. They slip away from us, returning to his brother and I become even more unsettled.

Honestly, I was surprised that my trio where allowing Darvik to touch me like this. They didn't challenge him for his forwardness and, to be truthful, to say that I was absolutely hating it would have been a lie anyway. It was just that the whole situation felt a bit odd and somewhat surreal. Had this have happened weeks ago, then I had no doubt that Darvik would have probably lost his head by now.

Strange, really, I consider it quietly. It was as though they no longer considered him a threat, despite the fact they still didn't particularly like him. They trusted him enough to know he wouldn't harm me. Or them. And the sudden revelation of it staggers me. They were bonding, growing accustomed to one another and probably weren't even aware that it was happening.

I shift some more and Darvik clasps me tighter, taking my movements as a sign that I am trying to get away from him.

"No…" he trills lowly so that only I can hear. "Do not fight me. There is no need to fear my touch."

I tut at him. "I don't, you big ape. Will you please stop sniffing me? Concentrate on what you're doing."

His tone turns silken, heavy and heated. "*Nej.* Why should I? Allow me this moment… for I have been a patient male for you, have I not?"

My pulse roars in my ears as I try to think of something else to say. His chest continues to vibrate with heady sounds and the swell in his groin hasn't reduced any either. If anything, I could swear it was getting bigger, throbbing through his loincloth as though seeking my attention. Or was that my imagination?

Something drifts against my calves and I flinch. That devious reptilian tail of his is moving again, slithering higher up my legs. It sneaks between them, never once hesitating. I gnaw back a squeal and attempt to clamp my thighs together, reminded of the fact that I'm not wearing any underwear underneath my net-like tunic. That appendage of his gently twists its way deeper and whispers against the heat of my sex, barely there, but felt nonetheless as it accidentality sweeps across my clit in passing...

Oh no...

Fiery warmth crawls through my core. Unable to keep still, I end up arching, eliciting a purr from the male holding me.

"Darvik…" I rasp, shuddering as every nerve in my being flares to life.

The others are too busy watching Yaknaur to see what is happening beneath the table with us. My cheeks scorch with heat, both in arousal and with guilt. Torn, I struggle with myself, unsure of what to do.

No. I needed to get up. I need to move away and--

"Shh," Darvik coos with a languishing hiss. "Let me feel you."

My nipples pebble, my body betraying me. To my horror, I can feel myself growing wet as his tail brushes me again, this time with purpose.

In front of us, Memnis leans over Yaknaur's shoulder, pointing in suggestion.

"This one," he says, "bring that one to here."

Yaknaur huffs, shooing him away with a wave. "*Nej*, brother. You are of no help. I shall do this by myself."

Taking his turn, Yaknaur makes a killer move and collects all of Darvik's remaining rocks, winning the match. He crows loudly, making us both jump.

"I am victorious! You did not stand a chance, *Vindas.* Now…" He holds his arms out, beckoning to me. His eyes are molten. "Give her back to me. Come to me, my female."

My legs tremble as I move to go to him. Darvik shows me mercy, letting me slide free to return to my mate, but not before giving me one last lingering nip on the back of my neck.

I gasp and lurch forward, all but diving my way back into the safety of Yaknaur's arms. I cuddle into him, feeling Darvik's gaze burning into the stiffened line of my spine. I burrow into Yaknaur's shoulder, needing to hide my face which I had no doubt would be bright pink

in colour right now. He sniffs at me and I can't help but worry that he can smell some of my deceitful arousal. If he does, he makes no comment on it.

"You played well, *Vindas*," Yaknaur says instead, focussing on him. "In truth, I sensed that you were holding back from me. What's the matter? Did you lose some of your nerve?"

"Perhaps…" Is the ominous reply, refusing to explain further.

"Another game?" Yaknaur asks keenly, but not before tugging me tighter to him. "This time she stays with me." Meaning me.

I sense rather than see that Darvik gives a nod of agreement. "Agreed... Again."

"You can go first," Yaknaur says, getting us both comfortable in his seat.

This time around I refuse to leave Yaknaur's side, still shaken. I chide myself for having such poor control over my own body. To my further surprise, Yaknaur seems to be enjoying the other hunter's company and the time passes along without any conflict. Which was odd, as I currently felt like I was at a pyjama party with Freddy Krueger and Michael Myers, just waiting for something awful to happen or go wrong. Only it wasn't. I peer back, eyeing each of them in turn, dumbfounded. Where the hell had the two raging, fighting males gone to? They hated one another.

Didn't they?

"This is so weird," I mutter, more to myself than anyone else.

"Hmm?" Yaknaur hums, half-listening, his focus elsewhere.

"Nothing. Nevermind."

I share a look with Sin'Chila, who simply observes us all with the quiet stillness of a tomb. If he had any thoughts on the situation he was revealing nothing of it, his face a mask.

Troubled, I snuggle further into my hunter and simply watch them, my mind rioting and Darvik flashes me a grin as if he knows exactly what I'm thinking…

Sly, Vindas. I narrow my eyes at him, my blood still thrumming hotly through my veins.

Eyes glittering, his mouth flares wider and I couldn't help but think that, if he could, he would have no doubt just winked at me.

Yaknaur's POV

Night draws in once again, bringing with it the lonesome glow of the moon amidst the ever-darkening sky. Stood there, Yaknaur surveys the world beyond the expansive window before him, taking it in with both serene and troubled thoughts. Vast planets and stars stretch as far as the eye can see, painting the darkened horizon in a vibrant splash of whirling colours. Each one unique. Each one different and home to many a species, much like his own. But it is not this which garners his attention, deterring him from rest. Oh no. His mind is in turmoil, playing havoc and refusing to give him peace.

"Restless, brother?"

He jars, calming just as swiftly as the familiar forms of his siblings step up to stand either side of him. For a long moment, they share the silence, staring out at the lush and savage jungle of their homeland.

"It would seem so," he finally admits.

Sin'Chila grunts, shifting to face him, his heavy brow deepened with concern. "You have not been yourself, as of late. What troubles you?"

Memnis chirps when he does not answer. "Yaknaur?"

Surrendering to them, he begins, raising his clawed paws with question. "What are we to do? The *Vindas*..." he pauses, trying to find the words. He rotates his head towards Sin'Chila with a pointed look. "Why does he remain here unchallenged, as he does?" There is no displeasure in his tone, only a solemn need for answers.

Sin'Chila huffs a sigh. "What would you have me do? I am just as trapped as you in this. If you have any suggestions that would be of use, then speak them now. I will listen."

Yaknaur scoffs at him in disbelief. "*Nej*. You cannot fool me. I know your mind, brother, almost as well as I know my own… You have plans for him, for all of us, and I wish to ask what they are."

"Tell me," Sin'Chila demands after a beat, his keen eyes delving into him without mercy. "What threatens you more, my blood? Is it that he is here? Or that she favours him?"

"I fear *nothing*," Yaknaur growls, his jaws flaring in ire. He steadies himself, letting the comment slide, in no mood to fight. For once.

"Ah, but you do. I see it," Sin'chila purrs knowingly. "You loath the *Vindas*, do you not?"

His reply comes too late. Hesitant. "Not as much as I would like to."

"He is a good male to her," Memnis utters quietly from their side. "None of us can deny that."

Yaknaur grunts, nodding, yet does not openly vocalise his agreement.

"He has bonded to her," his eldest brother adds, eyeing him closer now. "And she him…"

"Yes, I know." Yaknaur fights the urge to pace, his emotions rioting. Turbulent and uncertain.

How could he not know? It was a harsh fact that he would have to come to accept. The connection between his *chakria* and the other hunter had been growing slowly and surely, refusing to be ignored, and something had to change. Something had to give. Things could not go on for much longer as it was.

His brother spoke the truth. The *vindas* was an honourable male, skilled and loyal, if not persistently irksome with his lingering presence. His attentiveness to their female nigh on almost rivalled their own. During their game of *chekkorrs,* the hunter had dared to touch her, thinking he had not seen, but Yaknaur had been very aware of the exchange. His rage had boiled but he had kept his silence, and for reasons he could not fully understand. He had watched them, noting the way his *chakria* had responded. Doubt and excitement had clouded her *hooman* eyes, making her fearful even as the musk of her arousal had tinged the air with its sweet and alluring scent. Yaknaur rumbles then, remembering the way his own deceitful need had arisen, responding to them both. The predator in him had preened that his little female was signalling her desire to be bred. Even now, images come to him. Of her staking her claim over the other hunter*,* mounting over him in dominance and taking pleasure over his powerful flesh. If anyone could break the Vindas' will, it was she. Yaknaur knew this most of all. And the heady thrum of his own lust at the idea both perturbed and provoked him.

His *cros* stirs and he snarls, furious at his own weakness. His brothers glance at him.

"I am not satisfied," Yaknaur states firmly, fisting his claws before him. "I do not believe I will ever be satisfied with him being here. All I know is that she is *ours* and nothing, not even the Great Spirits themselves with change that."

"Perhaps we could try to drive him away again?" Memnis says in suggestion and they all draw still. Their answer was already set but unspoken between them.

No. Such a thing could not occur, for their *hooman Lartee* would only become unhappy.

Yaknaur huffs aloud in growing agitation. Inwardly, he could hear his *Arma's* voice bellowing at him for being such a useless warrior. That eventually their *chakria* would be stolen away and it would only be what they deserved for being so weak.

A hand lands onto his shoulder and it is enough to break the spell. Snapping to, he gathers himself, shaking his head. *Nej.* That was not true. Their female had already chosen them and carried their young. She was bound to them now, and they to her. Their father's word's held no power here anymore. His time was done. The future was theirs to decide and choose now. And decide they must...

With that, Yaknaur peers to each of his siblings in turn, taking them in with pride and with affection. They wanted what was best for their *Lartee.* All could see it. They were forever eager to please her, even if it meant bending the oaths and traditions that had led their people for so many generations before them. They trusted the other hunter, enough to allow him the chance to prove himself, but it was not enough for Yaknaur. He demanded more. And he would not be settled until it was given to him. Submission. Complete and utter loyalty to them. To all of them. Something that he doubted the *vindas* would be willing to give. At least, not without force. To achieve such a thing would take much devising and some meagre trickery on their part to give the other male the nudge he needed to finally succumb to them.

An opportunity...

At that thought, an idea springs forth, unbidden. Yaknaur's blood gathers hotly through his veins in a heady thrill and his mandibles spread into a devious smile.

"Brother?" Sin'Chila asks, sensing the shift in him. "I see a fierceness in your eyes... Speak."

Yaknaur's grin grows wider, sure and unwavering, his plan forming further. The time for dalliances was over. It would be the Vindas' greatest test yet, but it would also be his last. And with that, Yaknaur begins to explain it to them…

Chapter 50

Darvik's POV

He is summoned, and so he goes, though he does not know why or for what purpose they have called upon him. The doors slide open and, with shoulders squared in preparation for what was to come, Darvik strides into the room. The long narrow space is one he has not entered or been in before. It appears to be an armoury of sorts. With endless rows of blasters, spears and armour hung on display for all to see. The collection, he had to admit, was an impressive one. With pieces there that were rare, perhaps even much older than his own self. Treasures of forefathers passed down through the generations.

As he draws closer, his eyes scan the dais that awaits at the other end of the room. Three proud and foreboding figures wait there, watching him. Each of their eyes are filled with ice and fire, slicing into him as he halts to a stop at the base of the steps before them.

Chin set, he turns his gaze to each of them in turn. They take him in with equal measure. The silence thick like a shroud of mist, weaving its way between them all one by one.

"Finally…" Their leader, the one named Sin'Chila speaks. His impressive size stands between the other two hunters, his expression fixed. A gleam there causes Darvik's spine to stiffen with caution. Wary. "You have come."

Darvik offers a brief but respectful gesture to his chest in salutation. "As you wished. You called, and so I answered." His next question comes out with an edge of distrust. "What do you need of me?"

The trio shares a look, the small motion unsettling and secretive. Darvik steels his features, remaining still as they slowly nod to one another and then return their focus to him.

Something is about to happen. He can feel it. He senses it deep down in the very pits of his being. A decision has been made and his senses peak into high alert. With a will of their own, his webbed feet part, bracing. His body ready for a fight, danger licking at his spine in warning.

"Speak fast," he growls out, "whatever it is you wish to say… *Say it*. I have more important things to do than to play games with you."

"Stubborn until the end, I see," Sin'Chila states, coming forward. He halts once he reaches the bottom of the steps, standing so close to Darvik that he has no choice but to meet his cool regard head-on.

The older male speaks again. "It has become apparent that the possibility of ridding you from my vessel is nigh on impossible, *Vindas.* Why is that?"

The question is confusing to him. Frowning, Darvik hitches a shoulder with indifference as though the answer was an obvious one.

"I go where I wish." His biting tone lowers as he cocks a mottled brow. "From the very beginning, you have always known I would never truly leave this place. So why?..." He drawls the question out coolly. "Why do you ask me of this now?"

They all knew the truth, there was no need to deny it. Darvik's unspoken words are heard loud and clear. They knew why he was here. They also understood as to why he stayed.

The female. The *hooman, Lawtee*.

Whether they accepted it or not, he had made a vow to himself never to leave her side. She was his just as much as she was theirs. Whilst he may not be her true mate, Darvik was equally as caged to her as they were; their bond ever-growing and strong. The fiery maned little *hooman* now held power over him, more than she could possibly realise or know.

His existence had been so bleak and meaningless until she had entered into it. So, yes. As long as the female welcomed him here, Darvik would stay. As long as she did not send him away, he would fight for her. Protect her. Live for her.

Her hunter, Sin'Chila, trills low, the tusks of his mouth shivering, though not entirely with threat.

"I know what you want, *Vindas…"* Is all he says ominously, revealing nothing.

Darvik stares at him. Unmoving.

At his lack of response, the other hunter huffs, growing impatient. "You have left me with no other choice."

Sin'Chila's paw rises and with a smooth gesture something whirls through the air, flying towards him at his wordless bidding. Sin'Chila catches the approaching spear with ease and twirls it once before bringing its base down to the ground with an echoing clang.

"The time for reason and leniency has passed. I challenge you now, *Vindas*. I command that we end this once and for all. You *will* fight me."

The other two males advance then, prowling down the steps to join them. Their excitement resonates as they circle around them both. Watchful. Eager for the battle to come.

Darvik takes them in with narrowed eyes, his suspicions flaring. "What madness is this?"

"This dispute shall be between you and I alone," Sin'Chila vows, remaining in place without any sign of attacking. He motions to his brothers lingering nearby. "They will not interfere. I swear it."

Darvik stares at him, perplexed. Why would he do such a thing? He sensed some trickery at play. Each of them knew that he was the strongest of them here. He could easily beat their lone leader in one on one combat and he doubted that the others would simply stand by whilst he destroyed him.

What kind of trap was this? What game did they play with him now? He could not fathom it.

"I do not understand," he says openly.

"Need I explain it to you further?" Sin'Chila retorts, hunkering low, gripping his weapon with both hands. "It is as I say. If your desire for my *chakria* is so great, then come, try and take her from me."

Darvik shakes his head slowly. "I am no fool, wise one. Your female is your greatest treasure and she carries your young. You would not trade her so idly for such a low cause."

Not only that, but their *hooman* had already chosen. There was no need to compete on her behalf. Even if he were to kill them all now, there would be no reward in such a victory. The female would grow to despise him. And further still…

Darvik eyes the warrior before him, contemplating him. Reluctant to admit the next treacherous intrusion to his thoughts.

He did not wish to end this Yautja's life...

Darvik held reluctant respect for him, this leader, whom led his clan well and cared for his mate deeply. His brothers were his weakness and his strength. To kill him now would be a shame and his own feelings on the matter troubled him.

What had changed in him? When? Torn, he shifts on his feet, uncertain of how to proceed with this turn of events. Though he loathed to admit it, he had found a certain peace here amongst their den. There was a place for him here; if only a small and distant one. He could accept that. Anything other than to go back to his old way of life. The lack of companionship. The emptiness. Forever alone.

"Yes...And so now you understand," Sin'Chila croons with some satisfaction.

The big one, Yaknaur, comes to him and a lengthy spear is all but shoved into Darviks hands.

The brute points to his brother, hissing before stepping away once again. "Fight him!"

Darvik hesitates, the long weapon is heavy in his grasp. Unsteady. Sin'Chila braces, waiting for the attack that does not come.

Darvik's conviction is weak, nigh on non-existent. He pauses, and then, without considering it further, he throws down his weapon. It clatters to the ground, rattling loudly throughout the hall. His only tool for protection.

He did not want this.

The atmosphere around them ebbs, tightening.

Darvik spreads out his claws in a beseeching gesture. "What do you want from me?"

He turns to the big one, Yaknaur, expecting the larger male to come at him, to demand that he leave, only he does not interfere. Instead, it is his brother who slides closer, bringing them chest to chest.

"You reject my command?" Sin'Chila growls. "You refuse to fight yet you do not obey either. You cannot do both, *Vindas.* So now… *you must choose.*"

Darvik cocks his head. Choose? What was there to choose? The meaning of the other male's words evaded him entirely.

"What's the matter, *cretin?*" Yaknaur sneers, although it lacked some of its usual mockery. "Go on… Fight him."

Darvik shakes his head. Resolute. "I will not." He says, fixing his gaze back onto Sin'Chila. "I shall not."

The hunter before him chuckles. An eerie knowing sound that causes the skin down Darvik's sides to quiver in awareness.

Sin'Chila moves. Without warning, he lunges at Darvik, raising his spear high. Darvik barely has the chance to react before the sharpened edge of it comes slicing through the air towards his throat. His heart leaps, yet he stands steady, lifting his chin just as the blade flashes down towards his skin.

It pauses at the last possible instance. Abrupt. Hovering. Not quite making contact. A skilled and sly move, indeed.

One tiny moment too late and his neck could have been severed deeply. Even now, the other hunter had complete control. He could kill Darvik at this very instant, defenceless as he was.

"Will you fight now?" Sin'Chila asks.

He is being tested. Darvik senses it like the gust of a breeze against his mind. He lifts his chin higher, giving his opponent further access to his throat. A show of weakness, and of submission.

"No."

"No?"

The female, *Lawtee,* comes to him again; the image of her small, delicate and alien face. The trusting, soft eyes that had beheld him. Not with fear, but with acceptance.

"Perhaps I was wrong about you?" Sin'Chila drawls, trying to goad him. "You are a coward after all… Such a pity." He starts to turn away, lowering his spear to his side. Vulnerable.

Darvik scowls at him. *Never turn your back onto an enemy.* It was a harsh and necessary lesson that they had all learnt to follow as warriors. Yet now the older male was openly exposing himself, giving Darvik the chance to strike at him from behind. The gravest of errors.

Darvik remains still, watching him, refusing to be baited. Surprised, Sin'Chila slowly peers back over his shoulder, a quizzical look on his face.

"I am not a coward," Darvik states gruffly.

The other hunter grunts as if in agreement. "Indeed... But you are definitely a mystery, *Vindas."* He turns to fully face him again.

"Tell me," Darvik starts suddenly, tired of this foolishness between them, hating the pleading edge that had entered his own voice. "You know what I want." He hesitates, mandibles clacking. Restless. He can all but hear his own pride crumbling from within. "I do not wish to take her from you. Know this… My only desire is to…" The words will not come. They knot within his throat, failing to emerge.

Sin'Chila's gaze burns him. He knows. He sees the truth. He knows of what Darvik speaks of. Of what he seeks to ask.

The true question was… would he allow Darvik the chance to win her? Would they be willing to share her?

"Why should I give you such an honour? What makes you think you are deserving?"

Darvik stills in thought, for even he did not know the answer. In pensive silence, he stands there, already feeling foolish for daring to request such a thing. For laying his soul out, only for it to be crushed. As it was now. As it would be once--

"Kneel, *Vindas*."

Darvik snaps to and his brows deepen at the order.

Sin'Chila waits, ever patient. He carries an aura of cunning about his powerful frame like a garment. "Kneel… *He who does not bow*. Submit to us. For I will accept no disloyalty or uncertainties."

Shock slams into Darvik as the other male's words sink in like a knife. Sharp and precise.

Spreading his arms wide to the ship around them, Sin'Chila starts to prowl slowly around him.

"Everything that we stand for here, everything that we are, is all for the survival of our clan. To protect our home and most importantly… *our* female." He stops right in front of Darvik with purpose, leaning in with a hiss. "That very same female who, too, would welcome you."

Fighting the need to step back, Darvik sucks in a breath, venomous hope sparking within his breast.

Sin'Chila, seeing it, reading him closely, lifts a hand. His command clear.

"But first… you must bow," he reiterates. "Now. This day. Tomorrow. And *always*."

Will you do it? It lingers between them, unspoken.

Could he? Darvik considers the choice carefully. All his life, he had vowed to never bend to anyone's will, only his own. But this? To surrender himself entirely for the sake of a mate to call his own? Could he do it?

The answer comes to him, sure and brisk as a winter wind. Resolute.

Yes.

He would lay down his very life for his *hooman.* Everything he possessed would be hers. His weapons and strength. His body. His honour. Even if it meant pledging the same amount of loyalty to her other mates, he would do it in a trice. It would be a bond forged by honour and made with blood. Unbreakable. One that would tie him to them for the rest of his days.

Decided, Darvik shifts. And then, he slowly lowers…

To kneel at Sin'Chila's feet.

The act comes too easily to him, feeling right and true.

"I am yours." It comes out a rumble.

Sin'Chila stares down at him, tusks flaring with satisfaction. His brothers advance at either side, seemingly equally as pleased. With a hushed noise, a blade is drawn forth and the knife in Yaknaur's grip flashes in the low light. Darvik braces, expecting it to be brought to his throat, knowing how much this particular male despised him. Yet, instead, his foe bends close, holding the blade aloft lazily between them. His other hand lands on Darvik's shoulder with purpose.

"Is this your final decision?" Yaknaur asks with firmness.

"Once the vow is made it can never be broken," Sin'Chila adds, towering over him as well.

"Do you accept?" The smaller one, *Memnisk*, repeats, and Darvik looks to each of them in turn.

"I do." He speaks, sealing his fate from that moment onwards.

Yaknaur brings the knife to Darvik's chest, digging the tip in just enough to draw his luminous oozing blood to the surface. Slowly, he carves the flesh there, each swirl and scrape forming a particular pattern. Darvik does not flinch from the pain but rather welcomes it, basking in it and what it represented. A sense of purpose settles profoundly into the core of his being. Once the deed is completed, they all stand and face one another.

"Welcome… *Brother,*" Memnis says finally, resting a clawed hand to Darvik's shoulder in salutation and welcome.

Proud, Darvik nods to him, echoing the foreign endearment.

Sin'Chila does the same and as he steps away Yaknaur slides in to take his place. For a time, He and Darvik merely stare at one another. Where hatred had once been strong between them, they now met with something akin to quiet acceptance for the other. Though neither of them spoke of it, it was enough. For now.

"*Brother*," Yaknaur grunts, flashing him a splitting grin.

Darvik nods to his new clanmate. "Brother."

Spinning towards Memnis, Sin'Chila fixes him with a fierce look.

"Go… Bring *her* to us. We have much to celebrate."

And with that, the smaller hunter rushes off to fetch their female.

Chapter 51

I'd been laboriously grooming and washing one of the dirt-covered *daku* hounds when Memnis comes striding in, seeking my urgent attention. I toss down my rag and make-shift brush, peering up at him with curiosity.

"Come. Come, my *Lartee*. There is something you must see." He gently takes my arm, tugging for me to go with him.

Intrigued, I rise, briefly giving Pup a light pat in farewell. Without a word, I follow Memnis through the corridors, allowing him to lead the way. His large inhuman hand clasps mine, guiding me along to our new destination. I tug at the short length of my slightly dampened tunic, straightening it when its overly large size slips over one shoulder as I walk.

"Where are we going?" I ask with some confusion. This wasn't the way to the deck. We were going in the opposite direction.

Memnis purrs. "You will see soon… Come!" He sounds outright excited about something and I peer at him, wondering as to what mischief he was up to.

His heavy and sleek figure hardly makes any sound as he moves, reminding me of a cheetah as it stalks its prey. Gleaming steel walls line either side of us. All is deadly quiet save for the slight slap of my bare feet against the cool floor and the constant hum of the air filters overhead.

Curiosity has me gripped, especially when he draws me to a stop before a door I'd seen but never entered before. It was a type of 'meeting room', of sorts. Or so Sin'Chila had explained to me once. When these vessels had been built, each one had been designed to provide for much larger crews. This room in particular allowed for groups to gather together to discuss hunting and war tactics; though none of us here had ever really used it. Until now.

I lift a brow as the entrance swishes open, its movement stirring against my skin. Memnis nudges me inside and I cross its threshold, entering into the chamber beyond. I take everything in quickly. From the dull silvery walls to the even darker floor below that reminded me of marble. The area is spacious, bleak and empty save for a big dais situated at the end, with a short collection of steps leading up to it. Behind that lay an expansive window of glass that allowed a full view of the jungle beyond. Built-in luminous lighting kept all the shadows away, casting a subtle glow.

My gaze slides, returning to the platform and it then that I see them…

Oh no.

"What have you done?!" I rush forward as panic consumes any of the earlier calm I'd been feeling.

The first person I focus on is Darvik, who is standing surrounded by two of my hunters. His expression is a mask, cool and collected, despite the neon yellow blood seeping down his wounded chest. His gaze is on me. Smouldering and aflame.

Devouring.

Memnis trails behind me as I march forward, not stopping until I'm right in front of them.

"Have you two been fighting again?" I ask Yaknaur, who doesn't even so much as blink under my accusing scowl. In fact, he trills and looks rather... *smug* with himself.

He drops the blade in his hold and it falls to the ground with a noisy clatter, and it then that I notice his other hand seated idly upon Darvik's shoulder.

What the…

I blink, taken aback and baffled as hell.

"Sin'Chila?" I turn to him, seeking answers, my anxiety growing. I shuffle closer, placing myself under his shadow. "What's going on?"

He chirps down to me and lifts an arm, sliding his claws around the back of my nape, holding me in a possessive but reassuring hold.

"Fear not, *Chakria."* His thumb breezes against my skin. "He has taken the vow."

The vow? What vow? I didn't understand. What was he talking about? I glance between them all, warily.

Sin'Chila rotates his head to Darvik and offers him a meaningful slow nod. The other male nods too and I see peaceful acceptance lurker there in that fleeting tiny gesture. With his arms shaking at his sides, Darvik shifts, and then begins to kneel. He rests there at my feet, not at all looking unhappy with being down there.

Woah… Ok then. Erm…

Gobsmacked, I watch him move into the position, thinking surely my eyes were deceiving me and I was imagining things. A good long minute passes in which none of us so much as murmur a sound. The atmosphere is so still and so heavy, it's like time itself has frozen us into place.

My heart starts to pound, gathering momentum. I stagger back, uncertain of what to make of what was is happening. Only to bump into Memnis who is behind me.

My widened eyes coast over Darvik with disbelief and so many questions fly through my mind. Why was he doing this? What on earth was going on? My first impression was that they'd threatened him somehow or forced him to do this. I knew more than any of them how tenacious Darvik could be; his stubbornness legendary, to say the least.

"He is one of us," someone says. I'm not sure who.

I frown as my brain races at a hundred miles an hour. Darvik all the while simply stares up at me with hooded eyes, breathing steadily. Yaknaur and Sin'Chila hover beside him like sentinels, appearing rather content and not at all fazed.

My focus darts to Darvik's chest, which still continues to weep, only to notice that the wound there is not overly deep and the flesh seems to have been carved into a familiar design.

A shiver rolls through me…

I recognised this mark. It was the exact same one that I carried as well; that we all bore like a branding of our bond to one other.

The Yautja symbol of our clan.

"Oh." It falls out of my mouth in an awkward gasp.

"Do you accept him?"

Still in a daze, I blink at Sin'Chila, his words registering like the tolling of a bell.

"Accept him?" I parrot.

My mate motions to the still kneeling male beside him. "He is *yours* to claim, female. Will you take him?"

I press back into Memnis, seeking his warmth as turbulent emotions rock through me. I don't answer. How can I when none of this is making any sense? I was their *chakria*. Each of these hunters had declared they would never allow another male to touch me. And now they were asking me to take Darvik as a mate as well?

Surprise batters against my reasoning, along with worry and shame and fear, followed by a tiny shard of anger. I wasn't quite sure where one began and the others ended.

Was this some kind of test? I couldn't help but wonder. Were they trying to see if I would remain loyal to them? I couldn't rightly tell.

"Chakria?"

I finally find the ability to speak as I mumble. "Are you being serious?" I look to each male in turn, troubled. I rub at my belly in an unconscious gesture of restlessness.

As though sensing my unease, Memnis presses closer, crooning low in a bid to reassure me.

"I-I won't do it," I rasp, my voice trembling. "I can't do it... I… I'm sorry." I shake my head, trying to force it to think coherently.

A hiss echoes. Darvik's subtle jerk doesn't go unseen and suddenly I feel bad. The set of his jaw never changes but I still see vulnerability and eagerness clinging to him. I didn't want to hurt him. But at the same time, I couldn't do this to my hunters either. I wouldn't. They hated Darvik, right? It would never work, even if I did find the idea of it kinda… tempting.

"I'm sorry," I gush again. I didn't know what else to say.

The walls seem to close in as more panic rakes at me. With an urgency I couldn't ignore, I spin away from them and start to head for the door, needing to get out of the room. I barely make it a few steps before a strong hand latches onto my arm, stilling me. I rotate just as Sin'Chila bends, leaning down to bring our faces together. His hold is gentle yet firm as he tugs me to him. His sunken eyes ripple like liquid fire, pinning me into place, searching and yet somewhat puzzled.

"This does not please you?"

"Why are you doing this?" I ask, trembling. "Why would you--?"

His claws press to my lips and I fall silent at his unspoken command.

"The deed is already done," he explains without remorse. "Through much tribulation and strife, I have decided to welcome him here amongst us. I have tested and watched him closely." His forehead lowers to mine with affection. His breath fans across my cheek. "Know that I do not make this decision lightly. It is for *you* that I do this."

"For me?" I echo. "But I don't need another male. I don't *want* another male." My own lie seems to itch across my tongue as I speak it. I release a frustrated sound from my throat. "I don't want to be selfish with you, Sin'Chila, or with any of you. I love you. It just wouldn't feel right… *in here*." I tap at my forehead.

Sin'Chila takes my hand and lowers it to my breasts, pressing it directly above my heart.

"And here?" He says with all the patience of a saint. "What does this say to you, *chakria?* Hear it. Let it speak your truth."

God, I wanted to cry. He was making this far too difficult right now. I didn't want to deal with this.

The truth was that I loved Darvik. Over time, I'd already come to care about him and consider him as one of my own. And I had done so for a long, long time, only I'd been too focussed on trying to fight myself because of it.

I close my eyes, struggling even now to do the right thing when all I wanted to do was fling myself at each of them and love them all. Without doubt. Without fear.

"He wants you… you want him too." Sin'Chila takes my chin and forces my face up which had taken to staring at the floor. "You cannot deceive me, little one. I see it."

"How can you be OK with this?" I ask him, utterly baffled. "I wouldn't be if it was the other way around and you wanted another female. I'd be jealous as hell."

He grunts a chuckle. "Do not misunderstand me. I am a possessive male, I always shall be. But you are my most precious life and there is nothing that I would not give to you, my *chakria.* He is my gift to you and he has proven himself worthy. He is now one with us, *our brother*… It is enough."

I still wasn't entirely convinced. Doubt was keeping any joy I could have been feeling at bay. The choice was mine, and yet, it wasn't. Whether I wanted to accept it or not, Darvik was part of the family now, which made me feel both elated and unsettled.

"I don't know if I can…" I say honestly.

It was one thing to feel something. But to act on it? The idea terrified me.

A sound comes from nearby suddenly, slicing through the moment. A rumbling groan. Not one of pain but masculine gratification. Undeniably sexual.

"Look..." Sin'Chila says and then sweeps to one side.

With his massive shape no longer blocking the way, I get a full view of what is happening behind him.

A short distance away, Memnis and Yaknaur still stand guard beside Darvik. Only now he is on his feet once more, standing tall and proud. I gasp, my eyes darting down his muscular body, becoming very aware that he's now as naked as the day he was born. His loincloth has been torn away, its scraps lying forgotten on the floor near their webbed feet. Memnis' coos and trills echo that of Darvik's as their eyes find me, becoming fixated and dark with need. Together their song sounds like a temptation; a sirens melody meant for my ears alone, whispering for me to go to them. To surrender.

Yaknaur, however, closes the tiny distance remaining between him and the *Vindas.* His stare is lethal as his massive paw delves down to grasp the bobbing length of the other male's cock. He grips it tight and is rewarded with a heady hiss.

Oh my god...

"W-What are you doing?" I rasp, swallowing thickly.

With sure strokes, Yaknaur pumps at Darvik's shaft, causing pale creaminess to dribble from the bulbous tip. The more I watch, the more its colour darkens with arousal, turning a vivid shade of purple, and not once does Darvik fight him. Instead, his hips thrust forward, eager for more of the contact, seeking friction. His focus fixated on me.

My own need flares into life, nearly knocking the very air from my lungs, pooling between my thighs like molten lava.

"He is waiting for you, *chakria.* He craves... He needs... Can you not see it?″ Sin'Chila leans against me, whispering against my ear like a devil trying to encourage me to sin. "Why deny this? Why refuse? Your joy is our joy, as is your pleasure. So go. Take what is yours... We will help you."

The whole room holds its breath. Expectant.

Yet still, I hesitate.

"Take him."

A hand nudges at my hip, propelling me into motion. And then, unable to do little else... I start to move towards them...

Chapter 52

"*Take him."*

A hand nudges at my back, propelling me into motion. And then, unable to do little else, I start to move towards them…

--

Exhilarating excitement thrums through the chamber, making it hard to breathe, hard to think.

I suddenly find myself standing right in front of my three hunters. They all turn to me, expectant, and with glittering hunger in their eyes. Yaknaur's grip on Darvik's cock never falters. With smooth movements, he pumps at his length, back and forth. It swells further, almost spanning the entire slope of his abs, the tip dribbling strongly now with his aroused state.

I glance between them, still finding this whole situation surreal and dream-like.

"Female," Darvik rasps, breaking through the hushed silence.

A low rumble rolls through him, his mandibles shuddering with barely contained restraint. His hips continue their leisurely thrusts into Yaknaur's fist and, transfixed, I stare at them, unable to look away.

His perusal rakes over me, both with need and command. I see fear lurking there as well; fear of what I would decide to do next. Of my possible further rejection of him.

His next words stagger me.

"*Preeeaasee*, female." He croons the unfamiliar human word awkwardly. Begging.

Please.

I can't stop the shiver that slithers through me then. There's no escaping the truth of it. *He wants me.* He needs me so desperately to the point that he was willing to risk everything to have me.

Something in me melts, warming me through and I offer him a small yet shy smile.

"I offer you all that I am," he says without hesitation. "Everything I am is now yours if you will have me?" Doubt and hope lace his tone, but another heady hiss follows soon after as Yaknaur's grip tightens on his flesh without mercy.

Skin gleaming with sweat and chest expanding with harshened breaths, he looks almost maddened. He has all the power to move away from Yaknaur's ministrations. Yet he doesn't.

"Will you accept him or not, my female?" Yaknaur growls, clearly growing impatient. His own loincloth is tented, the male flesh beneath thick and swollen underneath the thin covering. His need equally as great.

I knew then that whatever happened from this point onwards would change the path of our combined futures forever. Even though I still felt doubt about the choice I was about to make, I already had my answer ready for them.

I wanted them. I wanted *all* of them.

Slowly, I nod and inch forward, placing a palm to Darvik's shuddering chest. He inhales harshly at the contact and a dangerous hum of empowerment hits me.

"I do," I say, finally taking the plunge. I meet Darvik's eyes before stating. "You are now mine."

A chorus of growls thrum from all around, rising in crescendo. I feel its deepness all the way to my toes like the tumbling of gravel and the rolling of thunder combined. An eerie calmness settles amongst us, sealing us in within its depths. Along with our vow to one another.

A heated body finds my back, pressing there in a solid wall of maleness. Sin'Chila trills and nuzzles into my hair, letting me hear his pleasure at my decision. With careful movements, he reaches for the hemline of my tunic and in one smooth motion sweeps it up my length and casts it aside, leaving me bared and naked for all to see. The action is so swift and well-practised that I don't even get the chance to react. Cool air licks at my skin as every pair of ravenous eyes crawl over my vulnerable female body.

My nipples bead, aching to be caressed, and Sin'Chila does just that. Gently, he cups each breast, rolling and pinching the peaks between his huge, thickened digits until a tiny groan emerges from my lips. Moisture pools between my thighs, making them slick. Snaking his arm further around me, Sin'Chila slips his monstrous claws between my legs, finding my aching sex. He parts my folds and coats himself with my juices. I writhe as he withdraws again, holding out his hand, showing the others the glistening evidence of my need for them.

More growls follow, these ones more urgent. More ravenous. Like lions snarling around their next delicious meal.

"You are ready…" Sin'Chila breathes before lifting his face from my neck to address the others. "Pin him down."

The harsh order comes out of nowhere and, without warning, Memnis and Yaknaur grab Darvik by his shoulders and roughly grapple him to the floor. He goes without struggle, allowing them to dominate and splay him out like some kind of virile and godly male sacrifice.

I flinch at the display, my lust dwindling a notch. "Wait… what are you doing to him? There's no need to--"

My words run dry as they continue their sensual assault on the other male. Memnis keeps Darvik restrained, whilst Yaknaur takes his sweet precious time in ringing out his engorged, almost painful-looking erection. Even now, Darvik doesn't try to fight them off. His thrusts have grown desperate as rivulets of his leaking cum gathers in a pool within the dips of his strong hipbones.

"Shh," Sin'Chila coos, stroking at my back. "All is well. Fear not. They are priming him for you."

I eye them further. Uncertain, and yet incredibly aroused.

"Are you ready for her, *Vindas*?"

"*Yesssss*." The swift reply it guttural and savage. Almost incomprehensible. "Give her to me!"

All of my thoughts are cut off as a pair of arms suddenly gather me up and I squeal a little in surprise. Unhurried, Sin'Chila carries me the short distance over to them. I half expect him to place me beside one of my other hunters. Only he doesn't. Instead, I find myself being positioned over Darvik's body, my legs drawn wide and placed on either side of his hips, straddling him.

I gasp and all reasoning flees when the turgid rod of cock finds itself nestled between the swollen folds of my sex. We both moan, shuddering at the feel of the other. He's hot all over, burning up as if in fever. Eyes flaring bright, he rocks up into me, grinding against my clit. Unable to help myself, I groan at how good it feels.

"Yes, *Taz'arin*," he pleads to me whilst still being held down. Helpless, his muscled arms strain, claws fisting as though eager to reach for me. "Claim me! My *cros* weeps and is full of seed for you. *Only you*. Mount me hard and make me yours."

I lick at my lips, thirsty for him, ready to give him everything he wanted. What we both wanted.

Doubt rears its nefarious head as I glance towards Sin'Chila who kneels to one side, stroking at one of my thighs.

"Release him. There's no need to hold him down like this."

"Not yet." Sin'Chila shakes his head firmly. "He is in the height of his rut, *chakria*. We must tread with caution. This shall be his final and greatest test of all; one of will and self-control. And he must learn both if he is to become a true mate to you."

I didn't fully understand what he meant, but I took it as that they were worried that Darvik might hurt me somehow. Peering at him now, I could see why they were being cautious. Darvik jaws flare as frantic hisses emerge from him like some kind of feral and vicious cat. The other two, Yaknaur and Memnis, are now having some difficulty in keeping him down as he bucks against them.

I reach for him, caressing the muscled plains of his smooth chest, soothing and gentle.

"You won't hurt me, will you, Darvik?"

His stare is molten. Unblinking. Two blazing pits within the sockets of his overly large head. The pupils there are tiny and maddened in lust as the beast in him battles for dominance over the tender, caring male I knew so well.

"It's Ok," I whisper to him. "It's going to be Ok." I falter a beat before finally asking. "Do you want this, Darvik? I need you to talk to me. Tell me what you want."

"You know what I want." His expression is pure granite. The sharp edges of his brow cast shadows, making him appear devastatingly deadly.

With another impatient snarl, he surges up, his cock hitting its mark, spearing but an inch into me. I jolt and whimper at the sudden intrusion. No sooner had he impaled me does he retreat again, his own groans turning into a tortured whine.

"*Taz'arin!*" He breathes. Beseeching.

I lift a little, finding him again and dare to lower onto him. He's so thick and long that I struggle to take him even halfway. *Fucking Jesus*, he's hung like a horse, and he feels so good. By the time I manage to relax and take a few inches more of him, I'm sweating profusely, panting hard.

It burns. It aches. But I want him, now more than ever.

He's mine.

Determined, I brace and then in one swift movement sink down onto him the rest of the way, not stopping until I filled with him.

And the rest is history…

I cry out, stuffed to the brim and he jerks, sneering and snapping like a wild thing.

"Yessss!"

Emboldened, I take control and start an even rhythm, rising and then gliding down to the hilt. Sin'Chila draws closer, his hand sweeping my sides and caressing my breasts. My back. My belly. He stops between my parted legs to rub at my clitoris. His other hand grabs the back of my neck, entirely possessive.

My pussy clamps around Darvik, fluttering tight at the stimulation. My climax is rising fast, threatening to sweep me away in its midsts. I become so lost that I don't even hear what Sin'Chila and the others are saying to me, although I can sense their urgency. They egg me on with heated words, trilling for me to move faster. To fuck him. Deeper. Harder.

"Let him go," I rasp, wanting to feel his hands on me, needing to be close to him.

Hesitation lingers, but then, as one, they release the male beneath me and allow him freedom. A thrill rushes through me as I half expect him to grab at me and throw me onto my back and start pounding into me like an animal. Instead, shaking, his claws come up, hovering over the curves of my hips, reluctant to make contact, as though afraid he might hurt me. His eyes are pleading, rippling with lust and also uncertainty.

Encouraging him, I guide his palms slowly to one of my breasts, the other to my waist. He's being so gentle. Even in the throes of his need, he handles me with care, trying not to cause me any discomfort. He allows me to take the reigns and control the pace, but it doesn't take long before my pussy walls start to spasm and his eyelids flutter, feeling it too.

"Ohh, I'm going to cum," I say to no one in particular, sucking in air like it's precious.

"Yes," Sin'Chila purrs into my ear huskily. "Do it now, my *chakria*. Let go!"

Someone moves, and then something hot and thick is nudged against my lips. I gasp, my eyes opening to find Memnis now standing over me with his cock in his grip, fisting it with rapid tugs and pulls. He whines low, his thighs brushing my shoulder as he seeks my mouth, craving entry. I open up and let him in, lightly sucking at his length, gently tormenting him. I scatter kisses up and down his flesh, tonguing and licking him in a way I know he loves.

"Ah, *Lartee*. My *Lartee...*Yes!*"* he finally cries out, surging forward. I tilt my head back and open my mouth as his delicious cum spurts across my tongue. He tastes like salt and sweat and I drink him down thirstily with a hum of delight.

Yaknaur is next. He wastes no time in shouldering his kin aside and taking his place before my face. Unlike his brother, Yaknaur does not hold back. His claws grab at my hair, ruthless, dragging me over him with a command.

"Open wide for me."

He forces himself deep into my mouth with abandon, all but filling my cheeks with his thickness. Needy as hell, I let him use me, gagging around his massive shaft until tears streak down my face. His grunts and groans are like a melody to my ears. Purely sinful.

"Yes!… Good, female…" He chokes between thrusts. "Such a good little female. Take it… Take it all!"

I start to choke when he sinks right to the back of my throat, holding me there. I tap at his thigh, seeking air, but he doesn't pull away.

"Look at me."

I do exactly that, clawing at him as his cock throbs, flooding my oesophagus with his jerking release. His smouldering gaze slides towards the *vindas,* angling us both, just so, so that the other male can fully see what he's doing to me. I can barely breathe at this point but I love it when he's rough and loses himself like this. It turns me on so much.

My nipples tighten in warning as my own sweet earth-shattering climax comes at me like a crack of lightning. Yaknaur finishes and lets me go just as a scream tears from me in bliss. I wail, loud and shrill, as my cunt milks hungrily at the male inside me. Snarls sound as every pair of eyes watch me writhe and shudder over Darvik's body, losing my mind with pleasure.

"*Taz'arin*!"

Darvik grabs my hips then, shunting fiercely into me with a roar. My wombs shivers, bathed by the heat of his seed. So delightfully perfect.

Moments pass and, ears ringing, the world returns. Satiated, I look to Sin'Chila who still kneels at my side. Although I can see his raging lust, he doesn't move forward to take his turn. His eyes miss nothing, having observed our mating with care and closeness. He seems more focused on making sure that I'm kept safe than taking his fair share of pleasure.

I reach for him, slipping my hand into his loincloth with purpose. Having four huge males to take care of in the bedroom department was a lot to handle but I refused to leave him out. I didn't care how much he wanted to be in control.

"No, *chakria."* He tries to stop me, only to emit a long growl as my tiny fingers wrap around his impressive length.

I shake my head at him, my eyes hooded. "Do not deny me." I echo the words he himself had spoken to me so many times before. I tighten my hold, rewarded with a thick dribble of pre-cum across my knuckles. "Let me take care of you, Sin'Chila."

He grunts and adjusts his weight, parting his thighs to allow me better access. I increase my movements, stroking at him with growing enthusiasm as he starts to thrust back, fucking my fist. His dangerous gaze shutters closed and it doesn't take long before he's arching, tossing his dreads back with a deafening bellow.

More cum shoots across my breasts and rounded belly. Instead of feeling disgust, there is only satisfaction and pride. I feel whole and wanted, loved and marked by each of them.

Arms guide me down, laying me across a massive chest. Darvik, crooning, snuggles me closer to him, nipping at my shoulder.

"Now you are mine," he chirps into my hair, his voice alight with sheer happiness. "Truly *mine*."

More caresses sweep my back and thighs, soothing and massaging away the aches that lingered there.

"I am," I answer lazily, burrowed in the moistened column of his neck. He smells of musky maleness and earth. And raw sex, I add to myself with a small smirk. "And you are mine too."

They all were. We were finally all one. All the chaos and stress of the last few days and months faded away, leaving the world and life feeling whole and right again. As it should be.

As it would always be from this moment on.

"I love you," I say to them all, and a chorus of low rumbles is my reply.

And somehow, deep inside, I know that, in their own way, they are saying it back.

Chapter 53

Months later…

Hands roam over me, seeking, searching, driving me insane with their loving caresses. I arch against the males holding me, sinking lower as one straining cock burrows deep into my cunt, only to then withdraw and another to slip in and take its place. They take it in turns, sharing my body. Torturing me. Darvik lifts me higher in his arms, his massive hands bracing and parting my ass for Yaknaur who becomes greedy and starts to pound into me from behind. Sandwiched between the two giants, I dangle there, helpless, burning up in flames and falling apart for them. Darvik snarls, becoming equally as impatient and Yaknaur pulls out to allow him a turn in my hot clenching pussy. All three of us shudder, our low moans echoing around the room. The waters of the bathing pool swirl around us, sloshing and stirring with our frantic primitive movements.

"Oh, please…" I start to beg, my orgasm climbing again to the point of torment. I'm almost there.

"Deeper, my brothers. She is close." Someone rumbles from nearby. And, with a growl, both of the male's paces turn brutal.

They give me no reprieve or rest. One pulsating cock slams into me, and then another. Back and forth. Relentless and absolutely divine. My arms snake further around Darvik's neck, clinging onto him as if my life depends on it. My clit grinds against his groin.

I've already cum three times, but it's not enough for them. They want more from me. They *demand* more from me. For what seems like hours they keep me like this, competing with one another as to who can make me moan and beg the most.

"Yes!" I cry out, straining as the power of my climax slams into me with all the speed of galloping horses. "Oh, yes! Please don't stop! Right there!"

"Give it to us!" Darvik barks, his tusk snapping at my face with eagerness.

"*Grekt*! She is so tight…"

They both push and pull at me, slamming me onto them with vigour. Yaknaur's jaws lock onto the back of my nape and I arch, the curve of my pregnant belly dragging against Darvik's solid abs. They took everything I had to give, rendering me wonderfully helpless.

I wail and writhe as my orgasm slices through me like a razor-sharp knife, stealing the very air from my lungs. With a roar, Darvik follows after me into bliss, surging hard into my sheath. My walls spasm, milking at him strongly, his seed flooding me with exquisite heat.

"Give her to me! Now!"

Suddenly, Darvik pulls out and his cum doesn't even get the chance to dribble out before Yaknaur drives home with a grunt, filling me with more.

I whimper and a chorus of husky trills echo in reply as many other sets of eyes continue to watch us from afar.

Heart still hammering, I return to the world once again. My ears are ringing and my body aches, but I feel nothing but sheer contentment and love. Unable to help myself, I clench at Yaknaur's cock one more time, draining him dry before allowing him to slip free.

Carefully, they place me onto my feet in the water. I stagger a little and suddenly the other males in the pool come forward to surround us. I slump back into Yaknaur tiredly, my bones like liquid. Darvik's sinewy arm about my waist keeps me steady. Sin'Chila jaws splay wide in a grin as he leans down, pressing his forehead to mine with affection. Memnis comes to my other side and starts to wash my torso, scooping up the water and pouring it over my shoulders and arms.

Each of them loving. Each of them as happy as I'd ever seen them.

"Did I hurt you?" Darvik squeezes his way closer and lightly nips at my chin. The odd kiss has me smiling at him. His palm presses to my swollen belly, smoothing over it. The child within jolts as though responding to him, making us both chuckle and gasp with delight.

I shake my head. "No, you didn't. I am fine, that was wonderful."

With a grunt each, both Darvik and Yaknaur accept my reply.

Time passes as I allow them to tend to me, washing and feeding me with care as the soothing cocoon of the water starts to steal away the lingering aches in my thighs.

I smile at each male in turn, stroking at their faces. With the baby within me growing every day, I had gradually turned into something akin to a walrus. I felt huge and unattractive, but that never deterred my males in the slightest. If anything, I hungered more for my alien mates, and they for me. I had each of them in the morning and then at night before sleeping; my sexual appetites having strangely increased tenfold. Instead of complaining about it, my hunters had risen to the occasion every time with eagerness (no pun intended).

"Don't you ever grow bored of this?" I ask quietly as someone starts to braid my dampened locks. *Of me*, I wanted to add.

Yaknaur grunts. "*Nej!* Never." He sounds almost offended by the idea. "How could I grow tired of you? I shall always crave you, my female. Make no mistake about that."

They all trill in agreement, continuing their ministrations. Memnis takes to massaging my legs as if sensing that they are giving me particular discomfort today. *Damn*, he was always so good at that. I moan at his touch and the relief it brings. His clever fingers are careful but dig deep into the muscle of my thigh, working their magic.

"Oh, that feels amazing." I flop my head back to Yaknaur's shoulder with a sigh and they all chuckle.

Out of nowhere, a dull ache shimmers along my flank. I gasp, and everyone's focus drops to me in concern. No sooner had the pain come did it disappear again, leaving only a lingering throb in its wake. I rub at my side and Sin'Chila reaches forward, placing his hand there too.

"There is pain?" He asks with an edge of worry.

I pat at his bicep in reassurance. "It's ok, it's passed. I keep getting these little niggling aches sometimes, but they don't last long, so I'm not going to worry about it." At Yaknaur's huff of displeasure, I add. "Honestly guys, it's fine. If I start to feel like it's something to be worried about, trust me, I'll let you know."

Sin'Chila nods, acknowledging my words. I could see he wanted to say more but refrains from doing so. We all knew that the time for me to give birth would soon come. I had no idea of what I was supposed to do. I mean, it wasn't as if they did evening classes for soon-to-be-newbie-alien-parents here. I'd eventually come to accept that whatever happened, I would have to learn as I went. Trial and error, so they say. I would have to trust my males to look after me and hope that everything went well.

I'm snapped from my worries as Darvik leans forward and offers me a small purple-hued berry. I open my mouth and he slips it inside. Chewing, its flavours burst across my tongue, vivid and tart. My thoughts drift to him...

I had to admit, I was somewhat surprised. Darvik had settled so well amongst us here. Now he was no longer considered the outsider that no one liked or distrusted. He'd kept his word, quickly becoming accepted by my other hunters in their trio. It was great to watch them bonding together. They hunted, they sparred, but they also trusted and relied on him. One of us. He was a demanding lover, to say the least. For the first few days after taking his pledge to us, he had been insatiable, refusing to leave my side, always wanting to please me, sexually and otherwise.

How could I not enjoy that? How could I not love him? He was perfect.

"Eat," he purrs when I try to move away from the next lot of food he holds out to me. "You must gather your strength."

"I'm full," I state, eyeing the leafy strip now held between his fingers. Whatever the hell it was.

My stomach was filled to the brim and I couldn't eat anything else even if I'd wanted to. The huge bamboo-like vegetable was not exactly a favourite of mine either. Its taste was sour and unpleasant with the crispy goodness of a salad. I hated the stuff and so did my males. Which made me only wonder more as to why they kept trying to give to me.

"*It is good for the youngling, it will make him strong and healthy."* That was all Memnis had explained before.

I shake my head again, refusing it. "No thanks. I'm done for now. Maybe I'll have some later." *Or never.*

I turn away and happen to meet Sin'Chila's gaze. His too-bright eyes gleam at me, dancing with mirth.

I shrug sheepishly. "Oh, come on. You know that stuff tastes awful. I think I'd rather eat *Naja* dung."

They all laugh, clicking lightly.

Memnis lowers further into the swaying waters, kneeling at my feet. His head presses sideways to my midriff, trying to hear and feel for any movement inside.

"Ah, little one," he croons, stroking at my hip. "Soon it will be time for you to come to us, I have so much to show you. My *Tizo*."

I frown down at him, a bit perplexed. "Tizo?" I echo.

"It means little warrior."

A stillness follows and my mates look to one another and then to me. Warmth floods my chest as I realise it's a name of sorts. Memnis has chosen a name and the others seem to like it and are looking to me for confirmation. I found the whole exchange rather cute.

"I like that name," I say with a nod. "Tizo it is."

More trills follow, sealing the moment and making it precious.

Yaknaur tightens his embrace, his palm sliding down to join that of his brothers against my bump.

"When he is grown we shall show him so many places. We shall see many worlds and he will be the best of many hunters to come. He will learn of his true heritage, of where his people came from and their greatest histories and triumphs."

Sin'Chila grunts."Indeed. We will take him to the temples of *Al'Agar, t*he unified heart of our homeland."

"The ali-whaty?" I try to repeat the word and fail.

Chuckling at my poor attempt, Sin'Chila corrects me. "The *Al'Agar*. The city itself is vast and it is where the very first of our species began. Many still reside there. It is considered a beacon to our kind; a true home. It is where my brothers and I grew up to be the warriors that we are today." He makes a sound then, like a sigh. Wistful. "Ah, I remember it well."

"As do I," chirps Memnis.

"Will I be able to see it too?" I ask, uncertain.

If this place was teeming with other Yautja then I didn't know if it was a good idea or not. However, I also didn't like the idea of being left behind. I hoped that wasn't what they were trying to hint at.

"But of course!" Sin'Chila growls, reading my expression carefully. "Wherever we go you shall follow, we will never leave your side. You are our *chakria.* None will harm you or our young, this I swear. It would be a great dishonour by any who would try to do so. Whilst here there are no rules to govern us. But the laws within *Al'Agar* state clear that none shall hurt the mate of another. It is absolute."

Relaxing again, I draw into my thoughts. His reassurance was enough. For now. I knew that whatever happened they would all look after me and protect me. Whatever the future held for us I would welcome it with open arms. With them.

I pat at my belly idly.

Soon, little man.

Soon he would be here and I had to be ready.

A week or so later…

--

I gasp, yanked from my terrible dreams. I jolt wide awake, my eyes burning as I blink into the gloom of our nesting chamber. Panicked, I try to shoot upright, only to find myself unable to do so. Hot streaks of lightning pain shoot down my body, weaving its way through my side and into the V of my crotch. Tight. Burning.

What the…

I suck in a harsh gulp of air, trying to catch my breath which seems to be stolen from me. Anxiety rakes and I roll to one side, eagerly seeking out the presence of my mates. They all slumber nearby; Yaknaur and Darvik on my left, Sin'Chila behind me and Memnis by my feet. Their light snores tell me I've not woken them with my frantic writhing.

I roll the other way and reach out into the darkness, seeking out Sin'Chila's shape. I can tell by his body heat that he's not far away. The darkened outline of his massive back faces me and I nudge at him. Needing him.

"Sin'Chila," I call, my voice cracking as another wave of intense pain crashes through me with all the power of a giant merciless fist.

I scrunch tightly into myself, doubling over. Another cry echoes and suddenly everyone is awake and moving.

Before I can even gather myself, four males are knelt around me, pushing me onto my back. I peer up at them, my lashes fluttering and my brows creasing at the agony I can't seem to escape.

"What is it, *chakria*?" Sin'Chila leans forward, caressing my cheek. "Tell me what is happening. Is it the youngling?"

I can't even speak at this point. I'm going mad, shuddering hard as the pain robs me of all logic and reasoning.

"Help…" I finally croak, my eyes flaring wide as I start to feel movement from within my uterus. The weight of the babe inside of me shifts lower, making me gasp again. It is then that I realise that the bedding below me is soaking wet.

My waters have broken.

"Oh god…" I groan and then grab for Sin'Chilas arm. "It's happening… I think he's coming!"

Our eyes meet and a fierce determination sets across his features.

"It is time." He nods to the others who swiftly start to rise.

Bending, Sin'Chila scoops me up and tucks me to his chest. Another contraction comes, intense and unbearable. With purpose, he starts to carry me away and out of the room.

Our son was coming. Fast. And he clearly wasn't going to wait for anyone.

Chapter 54

I'm dying. I'm sure of it. I feel like I am being torn wide open from the inside out; the worst kind of agony. For what seems like an age the contractions comes in terrifying waves, becoming stronger and stronger each round that they hit me. It's like my body no longer belongs to me. It has a mind of its own and I struggle to fight the pain that refuses to give me any reprieve. It seems to know what to do even if I don't. Birth was a natural process, I knew that. One that females in every world had to endure and survive through, yet I'd never experienced anything like this before. It was awful.

Unbidden, a scream rips through my throat and I feel myself tighten, all but willing the babe within me to come free and be done with it.

Many hands fall to me. Some holding me down, some stroking at my hair. Laid naked with my limbs splayed upon the examination bench, I stare up at the ceiling, my vision swimming and unfocused. My feet are in metal stirrup-like contraptions, keeping my legs parted and my knees wide. It's a very unflattering position to be in but at this moment in time the entire jungle could have been on fire and I wouldn't have given a damn.

"Oh my god!" I wail, long and hard, shuddering from the strain.

"Breathe, *Chakria*!" I hear Sin'Chila urge. His face briefly comes into sight from above. His glittering eyes are bright with concern before he moves away again to fetch something.

Following the command, I inhale deeply like the air is the most precious thing to ever exist. An object is placed over my face; a breathing device of some kind. All at once, the dizzying scent of chemicals rush up into my nostrils and, like magic, every muscle in my body starts to weaken. Some of the discomfort fades. Sublime and downright blissful.

I relax for a beat and the shifting in my womb calms, giving me a brief rest.

Memnis coos from my other side and reaches for my arm. A sharp sting follows as he injects me with something.

"I can't… do this…" I mumble through the transparent mask.

I lift a hand weakly to pry the strange mask away. The thing is heavy and awkward, digging into the underside of my eye sockets, clearly not made for a human-sized head. Someone moves, drawing close, and a massive male hand gently pulls my arm down, halting my efforts.

"Be still, female, it will help," Yaknaur rumbles, bending near to rub the line of his inhuman jaw against me in a gesture of comfort. "You must be strong for us now."

I nod, lost in a sort of delirium. The air stirs as they move back and forth around me, although I cannot see what it is that they are doing. More contractions come and all I want to do is shriek to the universe for making childbirth so fucking painful.

"The youngling is stabilising," someone reports. "Heart is steady and strong."

I don't know how long I continue like this but the next time I start to bear down Darvik pops his head up from his position between my parted legs. The silvery lines of his scars appear stark against his copper-shaded features. His earlier frown is gone, now replaced with a flaring smile of relief.

"He is coming! I see the head!"

Thank god!

Adrenaline surges and I squeeze as hard as I can. A slight tearing sensation follows but most of its sting is numbed by more of that delicious gas forcing its way through my nose. Jerking, I reach out. For someone. For anyone. A warm palm slips against mine, our fingers entangling.

"You are doing very well, my *Lartee*."

I find Memnis, peering at his face which seems to have lightened a shade or two. I see a fierce determination in his eyes, and also fear. He's afraid for me.

"Scream louder if you must."

And that's exactly what I do when the next round strikes. I howl like a woman possessed, the sound purely animal. My throat becomes raw yet the action of it provides some relief too. I listen to each of my male's demands, following them to the letter and throwing my full trust and well-being into their care. *Push. Rest. Breathe. Calm. Repeat.* Over and over. And never once do they leave my side. I'm so incredibly grateful to them that I start to sob mid-push and a tear slips down my cheek. It is wiped away promptly, along with my sweat which seems to be pouring from my skin like a running faucet. My back is drenched. The bench beneath me is slippery and sticks to my skin unpleasantly.

The baby moves, jolting me back to awareness. With another shriek I almost double over, squeezing at the hand in mine as I force all my strength into my next efforts. My uterus spasms wildly. My vagina feels like it's being torn open yet I feel the baby move through it some more. And then…

There is nothing. The pressure, the fullness…

It's gone.

I rear back to the bench, panting like crazy.

A mere terrifying second of silence passes before a sound comes, splitting through it like the caw of a wild bird.

A cry.

The shrill cry of a baby.

"Oh," I choke, realising what's happening.

Through the chaos, I weakly manage to lift my head and find Sin'Chila holding a tiny little bundle of flesh to his broad chest.

Pale grey skin.

I see a set of healthy-looking legs wriggle as the cries increase tenfold, urgent and needy for its mother. For *me.*

"Give him to me," I rasp, already holding out my arms, needing to feel him. "Please."

"Soon, *chakria.* Be patient a little while longer.″

Sin'Chila briefly carries the child to the other side of the room to a nearby station. Yaknaur and Darvik join at his side and they start to fiddle with various tools and scanners there. Their backs are facing towards me and a shard of concern rakes.

Was he Ok? Was he hurt?

One of them swipes at a screen and it flares up into life, floating directly in front of them.

"All is well."

They all give a rumble in relief and I join them with a huge sigh.

Carefully, Sin'Chila turns and returns to my side. I catch the lingering stare he gives to the child, noticing the pride and awe there before he slowly lowers our son into my eager embrace.

As soon as I look down at his beautiful tiny face I crumple with sobs. All the stress and all the emotions I'd been fighting back come crashing down around me and I am washed away under its torrent.

"He's so... perfect," I say between a hiccup, sniffling loudly.

I feel the bond between us instantly blaze into life. Longingly, my eyes scan over him, checking him closely. I take in the light charcoal coloured skin that seems smooth and flawless. His Yautja facial structure is familiar, just like his fathers', though hairless and tuskless. His tiny mouth spreads wide in a fleshy yawn and his eyes crack open, meeting mine. I am overwhelmed all over again to find that they are dark brown and human-like. Like mine.

"I can't believe you're finally here," I coo, pressing a delicate kiss to his forehead.

Memnis chirps, leaning it too to gaze at him with open wonder.

"We have been waiting for you, little Tizo." He flashes me a grin and I reach up, stroking at his angular cheek.

Sin'Chila and Yaknaur join us, each of them taking their turn to touch the baby and welcome him into our ever-expanding family.

Darvik hovers near the opposite end of the table. Hesitant. I hold out a hand, encouraging him to come forward as well. He shifts on his feet, somewhat awkward and I can all but hear the thoughts that must be going through his mind right now as he watches us. The child was not his. He thinks he's intruding. That he has no right to be here even though he'd pretty much been both 'midwife' and 'doctor' throughout the whole thing.

I frown, only to laugh a little when Yaknaur strides over to him and yanks him forward.

"Come! Do not hide now, *Vindas!*" Yaknaur slaps the other male on the back in a hearty gesture of peace between them. "Now is not the time to be a coward."

Darvik closes the distance and smiles at me, which I return with warmth. He sweeps a lock of dampened hair away from my temple before peering down at our baby. The big giant trills at the youngling, the tip of his tail sweeping up to dangle before his face. Tizo's chubby little clawless fingers clamp and hold onto it.

"A miracle…" Darvik whispers, unable to look away.

"Let me hold him." Yaknaur steps in, holding his arms open to me with a greedy gleam in his eyes.

Memnis grumbles with disapproval. "Do not hog him all to yourself, brother. We all want a turn as well."

The two males growl at each other, playful, but low with threat. Possessive.

"I am the second eldest. It is my right..."

"Come on, guys," I pipe up with a tired laugh. "Take it easy. You can all cuddle him. Just be gentle, Ok? Be sure to support his head." With that, I hand Tizo over to Yaknaur who all but sings his joy and gathers him to his breast. It was a strange thing to see; a massive alien warrior carrying and snuggling a tiny baby who could only just fit into the palms of both his huge hands. I see his pride and could already tell these guys were going to be such loving and doting fathers.

I battle against a yawn suddenly. Out of nowhere, exhaustion hits, barrelling into me with all the power of a train at full speed. There isn't a single part of my body that isn't aching or sore and yet my joy is purely euphoric.

I lean back to the bench, shivering as the sweat on my skin turns cool. Seeing my trembles, Sin'Chila leaves my side, only to return with a blanket. As soon as he slides the thickened hide over me I am almost instantly warm again, like magic.

All eyes slide away from Tizo and land on me.

"Rest, *chakria.* Sleep.″ Sin'Chila trills. "We will take care of our little warrior until you awaken. You have done well… *Sleep*."

I preen at his praise, my chest flooding with love for them all. Still smiling, I allow myself to drift, fully confident that they would watch over me.

My eyes shutter close. And then… I sleep.

Yaknaur's POV

The young one in his hold is unlike anything he has ever beheld. Reverent, he scrutinises the tiny creature, his breast aching as his *kava* opens his eyes and stares up at him. He is everything Yaknaur imagined him to be and more besides. His little body is light, barely even felt by his hands. So fragile. So vulnerable.

As one, the rest of his clan brothers press closer, forming a circle around the babe as they all take him in.

Yaknaur's throat clogs and he finally lifts his focus to his eldest kin, Sin'Chila. None of them utters a word. None of them speaks. There were none to give for this precious moment they shared. This was their son. Their *kava.* One born from the womb of their *hooman* mate. Nothing could begin to describe how fortunate he felt.

He glances sideways to his female who lays resting nearby, quiet and still. Her fiery mane shines in the light, darkened by the toils of her labour. Her eyes are closed, flickering in sleep as the smooth paleness of her skin gleams. His mind is stolen by the image of her, his body overtaken with the driving need to protect. To provide. To possess.

For so long he had imagined this. Of creating new life and continuing the bloodline of his people. And here it was. The proof of all his strife and endless searching contained within this very room. Truly magnificent.

An urge grips him and he turns to face Darvik. The larger male watches him, tail curling idly behind him, his expression keen and fixed on the child. Silent, he holds little Tizo out to him in offering.

"Here... Take him."

Darvik blinks, taken aback. "Me?"

Yaknaur huffs a chuckle. "Who else? This is my son. *Our* son. We are one clan now, and so, you will become a father to him also," he says firmly, brooking no refusal.

Reluctant, Darvik gathers the tiny male to him, inhaling his scent and crooning a low purr as the youngling begins to stir.

He bows his head in a gesture of respect to Yaknaur and the others. "I am truly pleased that you would honour me with such a gift. I will treasure him. Always."

Yaknaur nods back, flashing a small, smug grin. "Good!"

The oath was made; a pledge between them sealed for the prosperity of their clan and the safety of their newborn. No one would ever take the young one from their keeping or ever harm their female. They would defend and protect them until their last remaining breaths in this life.

With his Yautja blood surging through his veins, Yaknaur growls, unable to bite the noise back. Without warning, the bundle in Darvik's hold begins to wriggle harder, a shrill cry coming from his little mouth.

They all wince and peer down at Tizo and then slowly rotate towards Yaknaur with a scowl.

"Must you be so noisy?"

Yaknaur merely shrugs a shoulder, sheepish. They all return to the howling child, perplexed and anxiously looking towards each other for direction.

"Now what do we do?" Memnis finally asks.

No one answers. No one knows.

"Perhaps he is hungry?" Sin'Chila suggests, even though it lacks some of his usual all-knowing wisdom.

"Yes. Good idea."

They all straighten and then go, as one, in search of something suitable to feed their new charge.

Chapter 55

Epilogue

I stare around at the room of treasures around me. *This chamber…* I remember it well. With its plain steel walls and bleak interior, the space would have been empty if not for the mountain of items piled in its centre. From books to clothes, to weird and wonderful statues. Broken devices, phones. Jewellery. All of them familiar and taken from fellow humans at someplace in time or another. Sin'Chila had shown me this place long ago and, unlike back then, I no longer felt the pang of missing my homeland, Earth.

I'd been away from my world for so long now that I was struggling to recall what some of it looked like. Despite that fact, I didn't miss any of it. Its bustling cities were nothing but a faded memory to me now, along with its people and society.

This new life I had was a wondrous thing, I thought to myself with a deepening sigh. No more paying taxes. No more striving to fit in with the rest of the world. I belonged here; amidst a wild jungle that was lethal and dangerous at every turn. It was a raw place, reliant on sheer survival. But it was also where my heart longed to be most of all. A place where my hunters were. Where I belonged. With them.

My eyes skim around the items further, contemplative.

"Does your heartache to return, *Chakria?*" Sin'Chila says from behind me suddenly, making me jump a little. How long had he been there? I hadn't even heard him approach. He presses his larger shape against my back before adding, "We took you from all that you knew, from your people. I would not blame you if--"

I whirl and stop his words with a hand to his mouth. My fingers skim his tusks gently.

"No," I say, shaking my head vehemently. "Please, don't ever think that. Maybe, a long time ago I might have wanted to go back to Earth... but now?… No. This is my home now. *You* are my home, Sin'Chila."

His jaws flutter into a slight grimacing smile. "You are certain?"

I stroke his cheek and then lean up onto my tiptoes to kiss it lovingly.

"I've never been more sure. What more could I ask for?"

They had all taught me so much about myself. Of whom I was and wanted to be. I was no longer that timid young woman who never spoke up or demanded things for herself. I was someone better. Stronger. Wiser. When I'd first come to this planet, I had been fragile and lonely; abandoned by Jason who had been my entire world at the time. But then these Yautja hunters had come along. Hulking males who should have killed me, yet instead had chosen

mercy and kept me as their own, loving me more than any '*civilized'* human had ever done in my entire life.

It wasn't exactly like the romance stories you read about in books. Oh no. It was something infinitely more meaningful and precious. I had never felt more complete. My existence had never felt more right and it was all due to them.

My males. My mates.

I scrutinize Sin'Chila's alien expression closely, searching it for any further sign of doubt, finding none. I relax and then smile at him. I begin to speak, but a sound echoes, jerking us to attention. The shriek of a baby crying has me turning towards the door with a frown.

"Wow, that kid's got some lungs on him," I joke lightly. "Clearly he takes after Yaknaur."

Sin'Chila grunts a laugh. "Your *kava* calls for you, *chakria*. He seems to be giving Memnis much grief today."

"Ah, the joys of being a new father."

All of us were in the same boat, still trying to learn how to be good parents to our ever-growing son. It was a work in progress, to say the least. One thing was for certain though. My little man needed and wanted for nothing; my hunters made sure of that.

The wailing continues and we both share a look and wince.

"Perhaps I should go and rescue Memnis."

"Indeed. Would be wise."

Sin'Chila bends forward, rubbing his mandibles into my hair with affection before letting me step away from him. I barely make it a few paces towards the door when it slides open with a woosh.

Suddenly, Memnis is there, holding aloft a wriggling and screaming Tizo. The youngling's face is wrinkled up and darkened with his displeasure, whilst an expression of sheer panic shines across my mates face in an almost comical way.

"He will not stop," Memnis chirps fast with blatant worry. "He is very needy. What should I do?"

I lift a brow and then reach up, plucking the baby from him. I cuddle him to me and as soon as Tizo feels me against him, he instantly stills and quietens. Memnis trills in relief and his shoulders slump.

I bounce Tizo lightly against me and make my way towards the doorway again, carrying him with me. "Come on, you little monster. Let's get your belly all filled up and then get you to sleep. It's past your bedtime."

I cross the threshold and enter into the narrow metal corridor beyond. Footsteps clang and I glance up as Yaknaur and Darvik head up the ramp and enter into the ship. They're each carrying the body of an animal of some kind over their shoulders; a sure sign that their hunting this morning had been successful. They shoot me a grin each, clearly pleased with themselves.

"Come, my female," Yaknaur boasts. "I have gathered many of the *Ziluni* fruits that you like most. You can have them all. Let us feast!"

Sin'Chila and Memnis exit out of the door behind me, moving to trail after the others towards the deck.

"At last, finally..." Sin'Chila grunts with a teasing gleam in his eyes. "I was beginning to fear you had become lost or been eaten by some wild beast. What took you so long?"

Yaknaur snarls but then ignores the jibe. And I had no doubt that, if he knew what the gesture meant, he'd probably flash his brother the middle finger.

My legs move to follow them. But then, I pause, peering back towards the room with all the human possessions strewn about inside. It reminded me of who I had been and where I had once come from. Solemn, I linger as a deep sense of something crawls through me…

The feeling of saying farewell.

Maybe not forever, but to the life that I had once known and would never return to again. No regrets. No sadness. Just a calm sense of acceptance.

"*Chakria*?" Sin'Chila calls and I look to find he'd stopped to wait for me.

"I'm coming," I call back and start to head towards him with a loving smile.

The door, sensing my departure, seals shut behind me, closing off that old life I once knew.

And like that, I make my way onto the deck to join them all. And it is there that I stay, with my boy clasped in my arms and my four devoted males at my side. I was at peace. For they were my life, my future and purpose combined. My sense of belonging. My home and my family.

Always and forever.

The END

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Author Note!:

Hello to all of you lovely fanfic readers who have been following this story along with me.
I just wanted to give a huge shout out to those who have read, commented, and kudos'd (is that even a word?) this work. I was really reluctant about ending it, as I was so attached to all of the characters and their journey. But, alas, here we are. The end is nigh and I am so grateful to those of you who have been here to share it with. You've really kept me going with your support and enthusiasm for this fandom.

Just to give the heads up, I will be making another Predator/Yautja/Human reverse harem fic. I'm already working on it as we speak. It will include the same culture, setting and universe as this one, but with a new heroine and hunters. I may or may not even have Lottie and her mates meet up with the new gang and cause some mischief together... let's see how this goes.

So, without further ado, I would like to give you my thanks and I hope that you've all had a great Christmas.

Have a happy upcoming New year!

Oxo

-Weaver-

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!